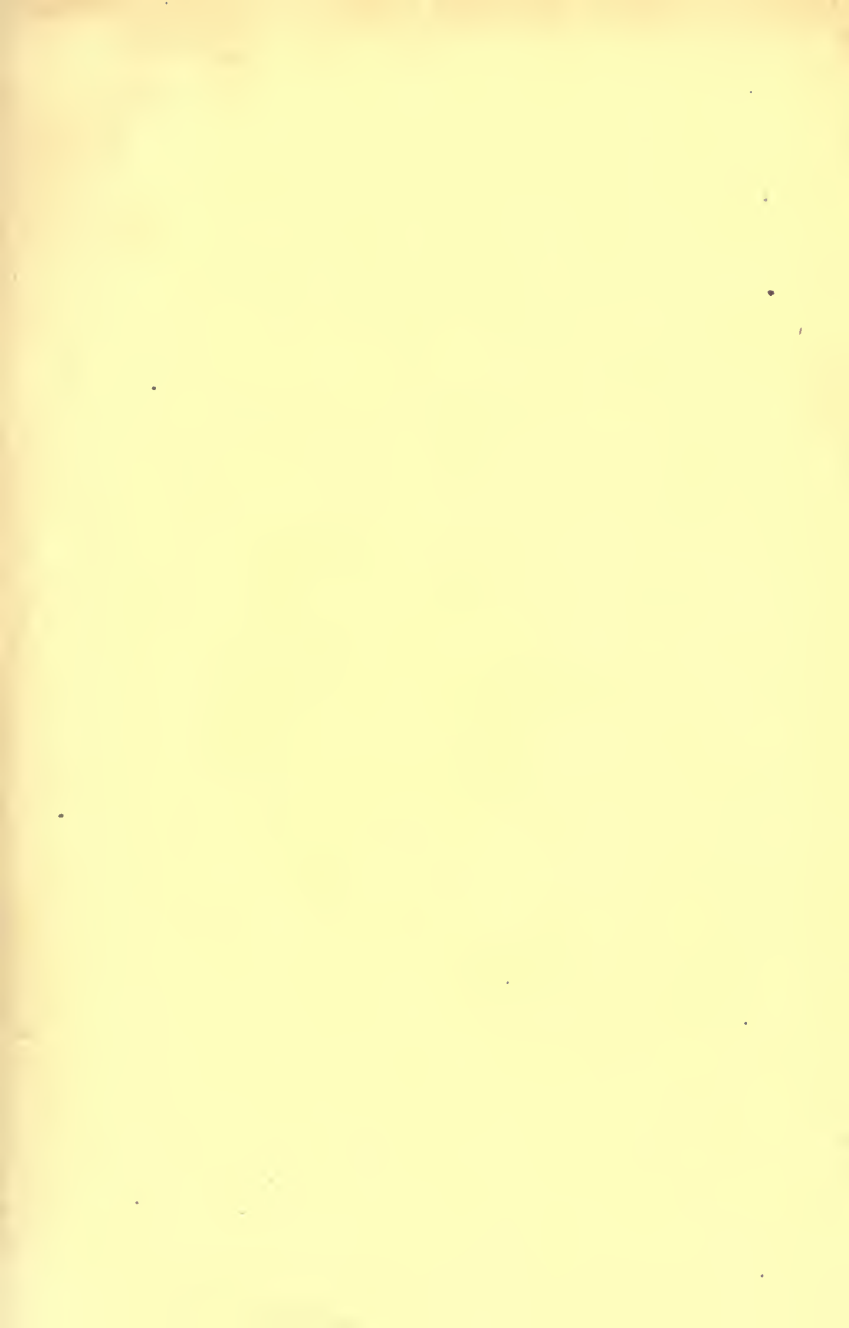


R. J.'S MOTHER

AND SOME OTHER PEOPLE

MARGARET DELAND







Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



[See p. 20

“EVERYBODY IN THIS WORLD IS NICE,” DECLARED R. J.”

R. J.'S MOTHER AND SOME OTHER PEOPLE

By

MARGARET DELAND

AUTHOR OF

"THE AWAKENING OF HELENA RICHIE"

"OLD CHESTER TALES"

"DR. LAVENDAR'S PEOPLE"

ETC. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS • MCMVIII

Copyright, 1904, 1907, 1908, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

Copyright, 1904, by THE CENTURY Co.

Copyright, 1905, 1908, by P. F. COLLIER & SON.

All rights reserved.

Published May, 1908.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
R. J.'s MOTHER	3
THE MORMON	65
MANY WATERS	103
THE HOUSE OF RIMMON	155
A BLACK DROP	219
THE WHITE FEATHER	275

ILLUSTRATIONS

“‘EVERYBODY IN THIS WORLD IS NICE,’ DE- CLARED R. J.’”	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“‘I HAVE ALWAYS SAID HE WOULD DO IT’” .	<i>Facing p. 46</i>
“‘I MUST HAVE SOMETHING TO TAKE CARE OF,’ HE SAID”	“ 60
“‘SHE USED TO TALK OF HER HUSBAND’” . .	“ 88
“‘DORA LOOKED UP AT AUSTIN AND HELD OUT TWO SHAKING HANDS TO HIM’”	“ 96
“‘SHE CAME AND KNELT DOWN BESIDE HIM’” .	“ 114
“‘A MAN FEELS PRETTY LONELY WITHOUT ANY —SISTERS, DON’T YOU KNOW’”	“ 244
“‘AGNES, I CAN’T HELP IT,’ HE SAID, PASSION- ATELY. ‘OH, IF YOU COULD ONLY UN- DERSTAND!’”	“ 306

R. J.'S MOTHER

R. J.'S MOTHER

WHEN Nathaniel Roberts lost his wife, her Blake relations were confident that he would marry again as soon as decency permitted — “or sooner,” said his sister-in-law, with a hard lip.

There was a shocked murmur from an elderly cousin, but Miss Blake nodded her head. “Yes; I am merely watching to see how soon he will be consoled.”

She watched from the very day of the funeral. Her tearfully keen eyes, under heavy black brows, were always upon the young widower to detect the first symptoms of consolation. “He will make ‘Boy,’ as he calls him, the excuse,” she declared, in melancholy confidence to the Blake connection; “widowers always do that. They say they have to ‘give their chil-

R. J.'S MOTHER

dren a mother.' As if Nettie's own sister wasn't better than any step-mother!"

The cousin looked doubtful. "Suppose you wanted to get married yourself, Frances?" she said. "Who would take care of little Nat then?"

"I hope, my dear Harriet," replied Miss Blake, "that I would never 'want' to get married. No refined woman '*wants*' to get married; she may marry—refined women do marry; my sainted Nettie did. But I am sure she never 'wanted' to. No; I shall just devote myself to Nettie's child. I have told Nathaniel that he and the baby are to live here—though it is very troublesome to have a man about; but it's a duty I owe poor sister Nettie. I did, however, say I would have to ask him not to smoke in the house. So he is coming."

He came; a lean, silent, soft-eyed fellow, who did his smoking in his office, and who bounded up-stairs to his little boy's nursery the minute he got home in the evening. He would have been glad to delay his departure in the morning so that he could see Boy take his bath, but Miss Frances frowned at the suggestion.

"It would be most improper," she said; "I always test the temperature of the water, and

R. J.'S MOTHER

watch Ellen when she bathes the child; but I could not be present if you were in the room."

The father did not insist. Instead, he hurried home every night in time to give Boy his bottle, and he used to be so long over the tender task that he was often late for dinner, which did not endear him to his sister-in-law. "And, oh dear! the cigar smoke in his clothing!" said Miss Blake, with delicate disgust.

Miss Blake had other reasons for disgust; it appeared that Davis, the wet-nurse, was not "Mrs." Davis. When Miss Blake discovered this, which she did by judicious questioning as to "Mr." Davis's business, she promptly ordered the young woman out of the house. Her little nephew, spurning an offered bottle, howled upon an empty stomach; but though the noise he made was very distressing, she bore it rather than have Nettie's child and her own roof defiled by such a presence. When her brother-in-law came home in the evening, she told him what she had done—of course, with the delicacy proper to such a subject—and his annoyance was only another proof of the difference between men and women.

"It wasn't our business," he said, angrily; "as long as she took such good care of Boy,

R. J.'S MOTHER

how did it concern us? Besides, poor girl! the doctor told me she was heart-broken at losing her own baby, and Boy was a comfort to her."

"You knew it!"

"Of course I knew it."

"And you engaged her!" gasped Miss Frances.

"I was looking for a wet-nurse, not a saint," he said, dryly. But he made no further protest. It was Frances's house, and she had a right to say who should be in it.

And, besides, so long as she made Boy comfortable, he was not interested in her moral standards. Boy was his one absorbing thought; and in all that first year of devotion to his little son, not even the watchful aunt saw a shadow of consolation as big as a woman's hand on the horizon of his heart. He did not make the slightest effort to "give the child a mother"; and then, suddenly, the possibility of doing so was taken from him: Boy died. "Because his father would have the window open right by the crib," Frances Blake said, weeping in her heavy crêpes. And then she told the Blake relations that it almost seemed as if Providence had taken the poor child to heaven, to his own lovely mother, to save him from his father's faithlessness; "for, of course, now he'll marry

R. J.'S MOTHER

again; widowers always marry when they have no children; they make loneliness the excuse. He has left me, you know, and gone to house-keeping by himself; that is the first step."

And yet, though this first step was taken, and the "decent" period had certainly elapsed, and the excuse of loneliness following the loss of his child was obvious to everybody, the faithless husband remained single. Two years—three years—five years! Miss Frances Blake softened; then, suddenly, hardened.

"I know men!" she said; "Nathaniel would marry again unless—unless there were some unworthy reason. Do you remember his shocking indifference when I found out about that depraved woman, Nat's wet-nurse? And, my dear, do you know, I heard—(I am not curious, but I thought it my duty to find out about the creature); Nathaniel paid her board until she got another place! I taxed him with it, and he admitted that he had 'looked after her.' A very suspicious phrase for a man to use, it strikes me."

"I think it shows a kind heart," the Blake cousin murmured.

And Miss Frances said, coldly: "Beware of allowing charity to degenerate into laxity, Har-

R. J.'S MOTHER

riet. No; I shouldn't wonder at all if some horrid affair keeps him bound, for I've recognized from the very first that he is the kind of man who marries again."

But "horrid affairs" always leak out, in time; and when ten years passed, and twelve, and still Nathaniel Roberts's reputation would have been—except in regard to smoking—a credit to Cæsar's wife, Miss Blake had to back down. She asked him to dinner every other Sunday evening, instead of once a month, and she told all the Blake relations that his faithfulness was beautiful—"Though probably," said Miss Frances, "he isn't very susceptible. He doesn't seem to care about anybody. And do you remember how composed he was when dear little Nat died? Indifferent, uncharitable people would say."

"'Still waters,'" the cousin began, mildly; but Nathaniel's sister-in-law made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, Harriet! As if a father who *cared*, could look down into his baby's coffin, and never shed a tear. That's what Nathaniel did. I watched him, to see how he was taking it: not a tear! Though you would think that mere self-reproach about opening the window by the

R. J.'S MOTHER

crib might have brought tears. But how time flies! Do you realize that the 22d was Nat's twelfth birthday? I don't believe Nathaniel ever thinks of it!"

The Blake cousin was silent. In her own mind she harked back to something that happened on the 22d—a chance encounter with Mr. Roberts in a toy-shop. . . . Nathaniel, his legs tucked around the pedestal of a revolving-stool, his near-sighted eyes peering into the mechanism of a small steam-engine, was speaking anxiously to the clerk: "You don't think it's too complicated for a boy of twelve?"

"Oh no, sir; why, last year, for his eleventh birthday, you got that automatic steamboat for him. He made that go, didn't he?"

Nathaniel mumbled something, and then, glancing up, found the elderly Blake cousin beside him and blushed to the roots of his hair. "Why, Harriet," he stammered—"what are you doing in a toy-shop?"

"What are *you* doing?" she retorted, laughing; and the salesman, with the intimacy of the toy-counter, offered a genial explanation: "The gentleman buys his little boy's birthday present here every year."

Miss Harriet was stricken into silence;

R. J.'S MOTHER

Nathaniel said, briefly, "I'll take the engine"; and as they stood waiting for the package, neither of them spoke. On the street, as he was helping her into a car, he said, under his breath, "I get things to give away on his birthday. Harriet," he added, so suddenly that his voice was harsh, "do you think that—that his crib *was* too near the window?"

"No! of course not," she said; "Nathaniel, don't have such thoughts; they're not safe." And then her car came along, and she had to get in. As she took her seat she slipped her handkerchief under her veil and wiped her eyes. She never told Frances. . . . And without being told, how could Frances guess that the wound of his boy's death had healed into a scar that was callous to all small interests or troubles—his own or other people's?

Indeed, Miss Blake's charge, of not caring for anybody, was pretty well founded. He had no social ties; sometimes he dropped into his club, and sat smoking and listening to other men's talk; but he never invited anybody to come home with him and take pot-luck; first, because the pot was not very good, for he was at the mercy of a working housekeeper with no cold-mutton imagination; but mostly because

R. J.'S MOTHER

he really would not have known what to do with a guest. Small talk did not interest him, nor, for that, did great talk either; and in his gentle selfishness (of which, like most passively selfish people, he was entirely unconscious) it never occurred to him to make an effort to talk of things, small or great, which might interest other people. In fact, the empty years had so dulled and dried his mind that all he thought of was his business and, perhaps, the dining with Miss Frances every fourth Sunday — until his faithfulness won him that fortnightly invitation. Once a year, on the 22d of November, he spent a couple of hours at Bailey's Toy Emporium; and that evening, bolting his library door, and clearing his big, shabby writing-table, he looked the toys over. He would set out a regiment of tin soldiers, and start up the automatic boat, and piece a map together, and perhaps end with a game of parchesi. Then he would pack them all up again, and the next morning hand the bundle to his washerwoman or to the janitor of his office-building, to dispose of. . . . But in all the years since Boy died he had not come near enough to his fellows to feel either their calamities or their interests, and in his dull routine of comfort he had had none of his own to feel.

R. J.'S MOTHER

Then, shortly after little Nat's fourteenth birthday, a personal calamity interested him most keenly; with it comfort departed—but in departing opened a door in the enclosing walls of selfishness. . . .

On the night of the 22d of November he had strained his eyes over a puzzle of colored crystals, and after that he began to notice how very easily his eyes became tired. By-and-by he had to give up reading his paper after dinner, so he sat and smoked an inordinate number of cigars before he went to bed. It was so stupid, this endless smoking, that he really welcomed that fortnightly dinner with his sister-in-law. He said to himself once or twice that he must see an oculist; but he kept putting it off, waiting for a break in the office routine. Then, suddenly, before the break came, a sharp attack of pain drove him to Dr. Tinker's in spite of himself.

"Confound it, Roberts," Tinker said, candidly, "a man of your years ought to have had sense enough to come and see me before this! You are to come now every day for a while—understand?"

Roberts understood, and frowned; but after a fortnight of dancing attendance on Tinker, and

R. J.'S MOTHER

seesawing between being better and worse, the physician began to look puzzled—and anxious, too.

“I don’t like that optic nerve,” said Tinker.

“Anything wrong?” Nathaniel inquired, faintly interested.

“*Wrong!* Well—” then he stopped, and became professional. “We’ve just got on to a queer thing in eyes, and this condition of yours suggests it. I want you to go East and see one of the big men. I—well, I am not just up on the latest treatment. Yes. You’ve got to consult Jardine. Better start to-morrow.”

But of course he could not start to-morrow. A man can’t be a shaft-horse for innumerable people and institutions, and drop his work because his oculist raises his finger—even if he does not mean to be away from home for more than ten days, which was the limit Nathaniel set himself. Dr. Tinker did not set any limit. “You do what Jardine tells you,” he said; “he’ll let you know when you can come home.”

“You don’t think he will keep me more than a fortnight, do you?” Nathaniel said, anxiously; and Tinker said he didn’t know. “Hurry up and get off,” Tinker said; “that’s all I have to say.”

R. J.'S MOTHER

So Nathaniel hurried. He crammed ten days' work into two, promised Miss Frances to write once a week, did his clumsy packing, and set off. No doubt the hurry made things just a little worse. At any rate, when the great Jardine had finished plumbing the poor eyes with the fierce electric beam, and making many other uncomfortable examinations, he was as disinclined as Tinker himself to set a limit to the time his patient must be absent from his office. He explained that Mr. Roberts's condition was unusual—"and very interesting, *very* interesting!" said Jardine, with obvious satisfaction. Then he said that it would be necessary for him to watch the case closely, and it would be many weeks—perhaps months—before the treatment which might (or might not) preserve Mr. Roberts's sight would be finished.

The knowledge that he had an interesting disease did not impress the patient. "But," he protested, with real agitation, "I can't possibly leave my business for any such length of time!"

"You're liable to be blind if you don't," the great man told him.

Roberts got up and walked to the window;

R. J.'S MOTHER

it was several minutes before he turned round and faced the doctor; when he did, he said, briefly: "All right."

Jardine glanced at him. "Have a drink of whiskey?" he said, kindly.

But Nathaniel shook his head. "I'm all right," he said; and then he listened with stolid attention to the oculist's minute directions. An hour afterwards, in his bleak hotel bedroom, the poor man sat down in heavy silence, to reflect upon the situation. . . . At first the knock-down statement of absence from business was his clearest thought. *Business!* How could he drop all his affairs? He said to himself that it was out of the question!—this confounded specialist didn't know what he was talking about. "Easy enough for him to say 'drop business.' What's he know about it? I can't pitch off responsibilities just to please him." But each time he reached this conclusion Dr. Jardine's calm, impersonal voice sounded in his ear: "You're liable to be blind if you don't."

That gray December afternoon, darkening into snowy night, was a bad time for Nathaniel Roberts. The oculist's statement had shaken him out of his lethargy of comfort; his mind began to prick and tingle, just as a sleeping

R. J.'S MOTHER

hand or foot tingles when it wakes up. And in this sharp awakening he recognized the inevitable: business must be dropped. There was no escape. Common-sense, lurking behind his dismayed consciousness of inconvenience, told him so. Then, little by little, the shadow of something graver than inconvenience began to close about him: Suppose he did go back and finish up these immediate duties, it might be too late then to save his eyes. Jardine had said so, plainly. He would be blind; and what would he do then? He had money enough to keep him out of the poor-house, but he would be a burden to somebody—even if it were only a hired somebody. “Though it would probably be Frances,” he said to himself; “Frances always does her duty.” The shadow grew very deep. . . . At first he did not know what it was; then he recognized it, and knew that it was Fear: he could not remember having been afraid since the night Frances told him Boy was going to die, “because you opened that window beside the crib.” Yes; he was afraid; and suddenly he knew that he was not only afraid, but lonely. He had not been lonely since the loneliness of Boy’s loss had settled into numbness. Fear and loneliness drove him to his feet and spurred

R. J.'S MOTHER

him into aimless pacing up and down. He wished he had somebody to speak to. The long, narrow hotel room, with its majestic black-walnut furniture, its gilded radiator, its one sheet of plate-glass smothered in stiff lace curtains, had not a human suggestion about it. He got up abruptly, and opened the window to let some fresh air into the dry, "knocking" steam-heat. The curtains blew back into the room behind him, and sometimes a snowflake rested on his sleeve, or touched his flushed face like a cold finger-tip. He stood there until he was thoroughly chilled, for it was something to know that there were men and women down in the dark cañon of the street, even though he could not distinguish them. The desire for human contact was a sort of physical dismay. As he looked down at the great hurrying city in its net of arc-lights, he suddenly shivered. "Nobody cares," he said; and added: "I'm going to be blind." The fact was, having had nothing to hope for in fourteen years, he had lost the habit of hoping, so now he did not know how to reassure himself; "I am going to be blind; Frances will take care of me," he said. A snowflake blew in, and melted on his cheek. He set his teeth, and went back to his chair.

R. J.'S MOTHER

Well, blind or not, he must think out directions for his office; that was the first step into a bleak idleness which might (or might not) preserve his sight. He did not touch the electric-light button, but sat with closed eyes, making little crooked notes that ran up-hill across the page of his memorandum-book. In the midst of his planning, something bumped against his door, and there was the clink of ice in a pitcher. Absorbed as he was, the humor of being served just at that particular minute with ice-water did strike him; he gave a sort of grunt of amusement, and said, "Come in!"

The boy who carried the clinking pitcher set it down on the marble-topped table with a thud. "Gorry!" he remarked, "three flights of that weighs some. But of course they can't let you go up in the passenger-elevator. The water might spill on the ladies' clothes. Say, shall I turn on the light?"

"No, thank you," Roberts said, and fumbled in his waistcoat-pocket.

"I wish they'd let me work the freight-elevator," the boy confided; "I could, perfectly well. I'd like that better than climbing the stairs."

"Would you?" Roberts inquired, languidly, and snapped his dime down on the table.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"That's forty cents to-day!" the boy said, joyously; "sure you don't want any light? Pretty dark in here."

"The light bothers my eyes," Roberts explained, and wondered at himself for being confidential.

"That's too bad!" the boy said, earnestly; "I've got some old eye-drops at my house. I had sore eyes last year. I'll bring 'em in to-morrow." He came and stood by the forlorn man, and rattled his forty cents cheerfully in his pocket. "Maybe they'll let me off, down at the office, now, and I could run home and get 'em, before mother goes to the theatre."

"Does your mother go often to the theatre?" Nathaniel asked, to make conversation. He was incapable of snubbing such friendly exuberance, even if it had bored him; but indeed it did not bore him.

"Why," said the boy, surprised at his ignorance, "she goes every night! And two mats. I used to go along. Course, now, I can't—except to bring her home."

"Your mother is an actress?" Roberts said, vaguely.

"Yes; oh, she's a peach! And she's splendid, too. You ought to see her. Say, why don't

R. J.'S MOTHER

you go and see her? It would make you cheerful to see mother," he ended, earnestly.

"Touch that button, will you?" Nathaniel said; he covered his eyes for a minute as the white light sprang from the ceiling, and then, blinking a little, he looked at his visitor. It was not a remarkable face, but it was a boy's face. "How old are you?" he said.

"Almost fifteen; I was fourteen on the twenty-second of November. An' then mother said I could be a bell-hopper; mother didn't like it much," he added, candidly, "but I jollied her into it."

Nathaniel was not listening. . . . Of course, there was no suggestion of a resemblance—but he was born on the 22d of November, and he was fourteen years old! "What's your name?" he asked. The boy said, proudly, that his name was R. J. Holmes.

"I'm named after my father. He's dead. Mother calls me 'Dicky.' Well, you know, ladies are keen on nicknames; so I let her. But my name's R. J. Holmes."

Nathaniel snapped down another dime. "Guess that belongs to you, too, R. J.," he said.

R. J. picked it up with alacrity. "Everybody in this world," he declared, "is nice. I've

R. J.'S MOTHER

noticed that all my life—but specially to-day. Fifty cents!" At the door, with his hand on the knob, he turned to say, heartily, "Good-bye!"

When he had gone Nathaniel gave a faint chuckle; the unwonted sound astonished him so much that it was several minutes before he took up his own weary affairs.

If you break your leg, or your heart, why perhaps bed is the proper place for you; but to lie in bed until noon, when you have nothing on earth the matter with you, is maddening—especially if for forty-five years you have been in the habit of getting up in the morning at 6.30. Mr. Roberts, without a soul to speak to, with no newspaper, with nothing to do except to drink a glass of milk at eight, at ten, at twelve; with nothing to look at except the lace curtains which, blowing back and forth in front of the half-open window, permitted an occasional glimpse of chimney-pots and snowy roofs—Roberts, after four hours of it, said a bad word. He added the name of the distinguished specialist. Then he reflected that as he had one hour and thirty minutes more of this tomfoolery, he had better try to sleep; but just at

R. J.'S MOTHER

that moment the chilly bump of ice-water sounded at his door. He turned his head with a sigh of relief; it was something to see a human creature, but to see R. J., whom he had entirely forgotten, was almost an interest. "Hello!" he said.

"I got the eye-drops," the bell-boy said, breathlessly; "I couldn't bring 'em up before, we are so busy! And look here"—he put down his clinking white pitcher, and unbuttoned his coat carefully. From his bosom he lifted out a thin cat, that meowed faintly, and clutched at his sleeve with feeble claws—"look!" said R. J. "Here's a perfectly good cat just starving to death! I saw her when I went to get the pitchers—and I was so afraid the hoppers might hit her a lick—they are bully fellows, but mother says boys don't understand cats. So I brought her up for you to keep for me till I go home to-night."

"I?" said Nathaniel, blankly; "but I—"

"Hullo! milk!" cried R. J., regarding Roberts's untasted glass, joyously; "I was afraid I'd have to go and pinch some, somehow, down-stairs."

He had put the forlorn animal on the heavy Marseilles quilt, which Nathaniel, being a man, had not had sense enough to remove, though it

R. J.'S MOTHER

had occurred to him to liken it to *peine forte et dure*. The cat crawled along its board-like expanse for a few steps, then stopped and uttered a thin wail.

"Let's feed her," the boy said; "she's hungry. Will she drink out of your tumbler, do you think? Or had we better put the milk in the wash-basin?"

"I was just going to drink it myself," the cat's astonished host ventured.

The boy had seated himself on the bed, and was urging the cat to take the milk. "Poor kitty, poor kitty," he encouraged her. The little pink tongue began to lap, fitfully, then eagerly. "Fine!" R. J. said; then, holding the tumbler in one grimy hand, he began to burrow with the other in various pockets; "I got your eye-drops; but I had to look after the cat first."

"Of course," Nathaniel agreed; "but, my boy, I mustn't take your medicine—though it's very kind in you to bring it to me; unless you'll let me pay—"

R. J. looked annoyed. "I'm taking your milk for my cat," he said, coldly; and Nathaniel was silenced.

"I'd put 'em in for you," said R. J., "just the way mother did for me; but I've got to go

R. J.'S MOTHER

down-stairs; we're doing a land-office business this morning. You just let her run round, will you? You put in six drops. Honest, do you think you can do it yourself?" he hesitated.

And Nathaniel, alarmed, said, hastily, that he was sure he could. When he was alone with the cat, he realized that fifteen long minutes had been consumed. A little later his uninvited guest placed her fore feet on his breast, blinked and squatted down; then, her paws tucked under her, she began to purr.

"I wonder will she get up at twelve?" Nathaniel thought anxiously. He looked at his watch, and then at the cat, and then at his watch again. Between-times he reflected upon the bell-boy who had been born on Boy's birthday. Suddenly it occurred to him that he might arrange to have R. J. detailed to wait upon him; that would be better than the man servant that Jardine had suggested; Nathaniel, solitary creature that he was, had been embarrassed at the thought of an attendant who would be in constant evidence. Yes; that was a good idea; he could bounce the boy whenever he wanted to be alone. "Cat," he said, pleadingly, "don't you feel like moving? It's five minutes past twelve!"

R. J.'S MOTHER

The arrangement to have all of R. J.'s time was very easily made at the office in the rotunda down-stairs. Yes; certainly the gentleman in No. 302 could have Holmes if he wanted him. As for the boy, though depressed at being removed, even temporarily, from an exciting career, he made the best of it with a fairly cheerful upper lip; "for, honest, I'm sorry about your eyes," he sympathized. He suggested that he should lend Mr. Roberts the cat, which he had taken to his own home; when the offer was declined he sighed. "I could have played with her out in the hall," he said. He spent most of his time in a chair just outside the door of No. 302, and without even a cat, it was pretty lonely. It occurred to him that if Mr. Roberts knew this, he would be invited to sit inside. So he mentioned it, and the invitation followed.

Nathaniel's days were full of the routine of treatment, the responsibilities of which weighed heavily upon R. J. He considered it his business to know the hours of milk, walk, rest, etc., and he kept the patient to them with a strictness which, if a little teasing at times, was very friendly. Of course, the friendliness of a child or an animal is amusing, but it is, perhaps, the most flattering thing in the world. Nathaniel

R. J.'S MOTHER

Roberts, at first faintly diverted, was by-and-by flattered; and then, down under that old scar, he was touched. Meantime the routine went on. Nathaniel's weekly letter to his sister-in-law was written in R. J.'s round, rather smeary hand, and was, in mercy to the boy, short. It was pretty much the same every week:

"Mr. Roberts says to say he is getting along very well. I am to take care of him. I used to be a bell-boy. He says New York is very cold. He says he don't know when he can come back.

"Yours truly,

"R. J. HOLMES."

This "blank" kept Miss Blake posted, and though it offended her delicacy to know that her answering communications would have to be read aloud by this evidently illiterate person, she did not on that account curtail their length, or spare her brother-in-law the recital of the various inconveniences resulting from his absence. R. J. hated the sight of her square blue envelope, but he ploughed through its contents, with incisive comments of his own, which Nathaniel did not find displeasing:

"She don't like people, that lady. I call that foolish. It spoils your comfort not to like peo-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ple. Mother, she's afraid of everybody, but she likes 'em just the same."

"I am sure your mother has a kind heart," Mr. Roberts said, sleepily.

"Well, you bet she has," R. J. told him; "and so have I. Now your lady friend, she hasn't."

And Mr. Roberts grinned silently. During those first three or four weeks of resting and drinking milk and trying to sleep, Roberts became very intimate with all matters pertaining to R. J. and to the Holmes *ménage*: he knew R. J.'s ambition to run an elevator; he knew Mrs. Holmes's rule that hands should be washed before meals; "it's tough," R. J. confided, sadly, "but I do it, to please her." He knew the rent of the flat, and the landlord's strange indifference to leaks over the bay-window; he knew Mrs. Holmes's salary to a dollar, and how difficult it was to stretch it over a whole week. "That's why I went into the hotel business," said R. J., gravely. And by-and-by the invalid knew Mrs. Holmes's age, too, for it seemed natural to R. J. to mention that when she was made up she didn't look a day over twenty. "She's thirty-three, but the stage-manager said she made-up twenty! And she was just splendid, too; yes, sir; she was *all right*. There were

R. J.'S MOTHER

plenty of fellows whose mothers were in the profession, and they were not all right."

Nathaniel was so startled by such knowledge in a round-faced, clear-eyed lad of fourteen that for the moment he had no reply; it seems superfluous to congratulate a son upon his mother's uprightness; but R. J. frankly considered it a subject for congratulation. "Yes; there's lots of boys, and their mothers have 'friends.' Mother," he declared, proudly, "is splendid. She never had a 'friend' in her whole life but me."

And Roberts murmured that "that was very nice." He was incapable of administering a snub to such joyous pride, even when it was a little insistent. He did, however, say, quite positively, that he would not go to the theatre to see "mother" in her new part. R. J. was promptly told to thank Mrs. Holmes—who, it appeared, "would get a pass for him"—and say that Mr. Roberts regretted that he was unable to avail himself of her kindness, but his eyes could not bear the light. R. J. sighed, and said, "It's too bad about your eyes." And no doubt he planned a call to console the invalid, for in one of their daily walks he managed to bring his employer to a triumphant stand-still

R. J.'S MOTHER

before the door of a yellow brick apartment-house. "This is my house," he said, magnificently; "come in, and you can see the cat."

Roberts, bored, but remembering the rejected theatre tickets, could not find it in his heart to say "no." A wheezing elevator tugged them up to the fifth floor. As they got out, R. J., in his excitement, ran joyously ahead to bang upon what he called "my door."

"Oh, Dicky," some one within said, in laughing remonstrance; "don't break the door down!" The laugh fluttered into a shy greeting when she saw who was with the boy, and Nathaniel Roberts had a distinct moment of surprise; he had not expected this sort of thing. To be sure, his acquaintance with ladies in Mrs. Holmes's profession was limited to newspaper pictures, but he knew enough to believe that the glare of the footlights does not conduce to shyness. R. J.'s mother was very shy; she led the way into her little parlor, where the air was sweet with hyacinths blossoming on a sunny window-sill, and when she sat down by a small tea-table she kept a tight clasp upon R. J.'s hand; she said, gently, "yes" and "no" when he made some perfunctory remarks about

R. J.'S MOTHER

the weather; only when he spoke of the hyacinths did she come out of her reserve.

"They're beautiful," he declared; and she said, eagerly, "Yes; isn't the blue one lovely?"

Upon which R. J. cried out: "Mother, let's give him one! Just one; not more than that." Which made her laugh; but she kept her nervous clasp upon the boy's hand; she was even reluctant to let him leave her long enough to run out to the kitchen for the once-forlorn cat. "But Mr. Roberts wants to see her," R. J. remonstrated in a shrill whisper.

As they went back to the hotel, R. J. was very confidential: "You see, I have to take care of her, she's frightened so easy. Men frighten her. I guess she don't like 'em. I'd punch any man's head if he scared her. No; she don't like men—except me. But of course I'm different. She wouldn't have let you in if I hadn't been there. I told her I'd bring you up some day, and she said not to; and I said I'd bet on you for being all right, and you wanted to see the cat, and her, and you were just dying to come."

To have his friendliness taken for granted in this way almost created it; but it was friend-

R. J.'S MOTHER

liness towards boyhood, for Boy's sake, rather than anything personal in Dicky. However, he no longer smiled when R. J. assumed that their wishes were identical. When the boy said that if he had one of those little toy steam-engines he could, he was sure, by a system of pulleys, rig up a pump which, put into a tumbler, would pump water right out on to the floor—"Oh, well, into a saucer," R. J. conceded, impatiently. After this statement it seemed a matter of course to Nathaniel to buy the engine, and to work over the pulleys until his eyes ached. In the excitement of toil, R. J. cuddled up against him and talked about his future: while it was big money to have a hotel—and when he was little he had thought that when he was a man he would have one—"I'd run my own elevator; that would be the real fun of it"; still, machinery was mighty good fun, too. There was a school where they taught you about machinery. He believed he'd go there. Did Mr. Roberts think that was a good idea?

Mr. Roberts did not say what he thought, but all the same he did a good deal of thinking. In the afternoon he said he was going out—by himself. R. J., much astonished, protested.

R. J.'S MOTHER

When told decidedly that Mr. Roberts did not want him, he looked cross. "Well, I want to go," he whined; and Nathaniel said, sharply, "Do as you're told!—no grumbling!"

R. J. continued to sulk, but Roberts went off with a glow around his heart. He had scolded him! That is what he would have done to Boy, if Boy had been naughty. Poor R. J., very cross, kicking his heels in No. 302, could not understand how those sharp words smoothed out that old scar. When Roberts knocked at Mrs. Holmes's door, she opened it and looked beyond him for the small figure she expected to see. He explained that he had left R. J. at home, "because," he said, "I want to talk to you about him."

For a hesitating moment she stood on her little threshold like a frightened mother-bird, poising with out-stretched wings on the edge of her threatened nest and looking at an intruder with soft, fierce eyes. Then she said, in a fluttering voice, "I—I'm sorry Dicky couldn't come. Come in."

When they sat down in the parlor, where the sun shone through the white roots of the hyacinths blossoming in green glasses on the window-sill, Mr. Roberts went at the matter in hand

R. J.'S MOTHER

with great directness. He had grown much interested in her son; he paused, and then said, with an effort, "I had a boy of my own, madam, who would have been just his age if he had lived."

Her eyes softened, but she said nothing. He did not allude to Boy again; the pain of doing so even once deepened the lines about his lips. He said, in a dry, business-like way, that he did not like the idea of Dick's working in a hotel—"it wasn't a good place for him."

She winced at that, and the color flooded up to her temples; her lips parted, breathlessly, as if she would have spoken; but she said nothing.

"I don't like to have his education stop at fourteen," Mr. Roberts went on; "he ought to go to a preparatory school, and then to college. I have come to ask you, Mrs. Holmes, if you will allow me to make this possible for him. Will you let me take him with me when I go West, and give him those opportunities?"

The instant incredulous resentment of her face made her words, "What! give you Dicky!" superfluous. Roberts hastened to explain:

"Of course not; you would come, too. I will deem it a privilege to defray your expenses."

R. J.'S MOTHER

She flashed a strange look at him.

"You can have your own home there, just as you do here; Dick will go to school, and I can see him every day."

"I think," she said, slowly, "that you are kind. Yes; I am *sure* you are just kind."

Nathaniel made an impatient gesture. "I am afraid I am only selfish; R. J. gives me something to think about. I haven't had anything to interest me for thirteen years."

"I am sorry," she said, gently.

"Well, then, we will consider it settled?" he said, rising.

"I mean, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You mean you won't?"

"I can't."

Nathaniel was really perplexed; her timid, vivid face was as determined as an obstinate child's. "But you must see that it would be a good thing for Dick," he remonstrated.

She smiled a little breathlessly. "Of course; but I couldn't."

"But why?"

She only repeated, in a soft, flurried voice, that he was very kind, she was sure he was just kind. But it was impossible.

Nathaniel was distinctly annoyed; to find a

R. J.'S MOTHER

thread of steel hidden in this shy, silken nature, was an irritating surprise. "Well, think it over," he said, coldly. He looked pale and tired and disappointed; she glanced at him, and then, uncertainly, at her little tea-table; but she could not quite venture. As for Nathaniel, he did not urge any more. He said to himself, as he stepped into the little coop of an elevator, that perhaps he had been hasty and tactless. After all, the woman did not know him; why should she give up her profession, and change all her life, just because he said it would be good for the boy? His long-unused imagination stirred a little, reminding him that such an abrupt proposition might even arouse distrust in a woman still pretty and in the early thirties. But he was too ruthlessly determined to keep this new thing—a personal interest—to have any sympathy with her gentle foolishness. He had no illusions about philanthropy; he knew he was entirely selfish, but he contended that his selfishness would be a good thing for R. J., and therefore he was justified in it. Well, he would not say anything more about it at present; he would just call on her two or three times, and show her what a steady old fellow he was, and then try again. . . . He carried out this

R. J.'S MOTHER

Machiavellian plan, which in a month established a simple, friendly acquaintance. There was even a kind of intimacy. He told her about R. J.'s eye-drops, and she no longer hesitated to ask him to have a cup of tea. Sometimes she forgot her shyness, and laughed joyously over some of R. J.'s remarks; when she did this the mother and son, in the pretty chattering inconsequence of their talk, seemed like a boy and girl;—and they were so vital! the clumsy, freckled, warm-hearted R. J., and the mother with the pretty color in her cheeks and her young laugh! Roberts, chilled by the silence of his thirteen empty years, found himself leaning towards them with cold hands stretched out to their warmth and glow; to be sure, now and then some gust of shyness in the mother would suddenly beat the light out of her eyes, and a cloud would fall between them. But little by little it was evident that she was no longer afraid of him, and that she even regarded him with a hesitating friendliness. She mended his coat for him once, and once she offered to write that weekly letter to Miss Blake; "I think I can do it better than Dicky," she said, with a droll look. Roberts availed himself of her kindness, to the relief, undoubtedly,

R. J.'S MOTHER

of his sister-in-law's eyes. "I suppose he got a chambermaid to write for him," Miss Blake told the Blake cousin; "it seems to be a woman's hand. I do hope he isn't familiar with her. Men are so coarse in such matters."

But it was not until a month had passed that Nathaniel was "familiar" enough to venture again upon his plan for R. J.'s future. When he did, her negative was just as decided as ever.

"But," he urged, "don't you see how good it would be for R. J.? Of course, I will be glad to be responsible for his education here in New York. But if I could have him under my own eye, it would mean far more to me; and ultimately far more to him."

"Very likely," she agreed, evasively.

R. J. pulled at her skirt. "Mother, let's! It would be bully!" She smiled at him, but shook her head.

"You see," Roberts said, speaking with manifest effort, "I like to do it, for—for my son's sake. You understand?"

"Oh yes," she said, eagerly, "I understand; perfectly."

"Then why—" he began.

"I don't want to give up my profession," she broke in.

R. J.'S MOTHER

Roberts laughed. "Oh, now, Mrs. Holmes, I'm sure that isn't it; I've heard you say that you didn't like the stage. Come," he ended, with urgent friendliness, "say 'yes'!"

"Truly, truly, I can't," she insisted in a flurried voice.

Nathaniel went away very thoughtful. The next day he came back—without R. J. It was in the early afternoon, and the sunshine poured into the little parlor, sifting through the screen of flowers on the window-sill and resting on her brown hair as she sat sewing; she was putting breadths of light-blue cotton-backed satin together. "It's for a troubadour's mantle," she explained, gayly. But when he began, with quiet determination, to demand just what her reason was for refusing to give R. J. the opportunity which was offered him, she put her sewing down in her lap, stroking the flimsy satin with a trembling needle, and now and then shaking her head. She heard him through in silence. When he had finished, she looked him full in the face, and said:

"I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Roberts. My Dicky is more to me than anything else in the world; but I am more to him than anything in the world. If I went to live in another city,

R. J.'S MOTHER

and you supported us, people would throw it up against Dicky some day, that his mother—wasn't all she ought to be."

"Good Heavens, madam!" stammered Nathaniel—"no one could pos—"

But she interrupted him, her voice tense and trembling: "Since Dicky was born, nobody can say a word against me. My boy has got nothing to be ashamed of; nothing! And I'm not going to make it so that any one could throw it up at him that a strange man, no matter how kind and good, and—and *nice* he was, supported his mother. No! I'll never forget your kindness; but I can't have you do one single thing for Dicky—not one single thing!"

Nathaniel was absolutely dumfounded; then the absurdity of it made him angry. "But—" he began.

"Dicky thinks I am just splendid; and *I am!* And nobody shall ever make him—wonder—"

Roberts's anger suddenly evaporated; of course it was perfectly unreasonable, but it was touching. "There, there!" he said, kindly; "don't cry, my dear—Mrs. Holmes. I understand. You are making a mistake; but I understand."

She could not stop crying for a minute; when

R. J.'S MOTHER

she did, he had risen, and was feeling about in his half-blind way for his coat. She looked up at him, and then came and took his hand, putting it quickly to her lips. "You are a kind man. Oh, don't think I didn't want to say 'yes'; I did. It would have been so fine for Dicky. But for me to be splendid, the way he thinks—oh, that's more to Dicky than his education!"

"My dear woman, you would be just as 'splendid'—"

"Oh no, no!"

"Well, you'll let me look after his schooling here, anyhow?" he insisted, good-naturedly.

But she cried out, sharply: "No! Nothing. Not a cent. Not anything. Some day Dicky might think— Oh, Mr. Roberts, you could do it for any other woman; but not for me, not for me—"

It was impossible to be angry with her while she looked at him with those simple, tragic, unreasoning eyes. Something seemed to make his own eyes dimmer than usual for a minute; then he coughed, and shook his head. "Oh, Mrs. Holmes, what shall I do with you?" he scolded; and went down into the spring dusk, at once provoked and amused; but a little tender, too, just for the foolishness of it all.

R. J.'S MOTHER

Well, of course, the inevitable happened: he wanted the boy; if he could not get him on his own terms, perhaps he could get him on hers?—for she must have terms! “Everybody has a price,” said Nathaniel to himself; and added, “But I like her, and she’s a good little soul.” Without liking and respect, not even his desire to have an interest in life could have moved him to consider the terms which Mrs. Holmes might be willing to accept. But the more he reflected upon those terms, the less exorbitant they seemed—except, indeed, when he remembered Miss Frances Blake; then, for the moment, they did seem high. But as far as he personally was concerned, they were not exorbitant. . . . She was so gentle, and she had sense, and she wasn’t forever criticising people. And, blessed irresponsibility! she never displayed any desire to reform the world! When he got home in the evening from the office she would make him a cup of tea, and they would talk about R. J.’s future; perhaps, even, sometime, he might speak of—Boy? She would probably know, because she had brought up a baby herself, whether the crib *had* been too near the window. Yes; he might talk about Boy; and she would have hyacinths on the

R. J.'S MOTHER

window-sills, and the sun would shine through their long white roots in the green glasses. Of course, there was no question of sentiment;—sentiment was the last thing he desired! His plan was just a way of getting over her absurd but somehow rather pathetic prudishness. Yes, when he came to look at it, the terms were not only not exorbitant, they were positively advantageous; to come home from the office and smell the hyacinths, and have a cup of tea by the fire, and hear some sensible talk—and she was pretty to look at. Well; if those were the terms . . .

On his way up to the flat to present them, he was distinctly pleased with himself—“Settled in a very reasonable way,” he thought. It was so reasonable that Mrs. Holmes’s recoil of astonishment astonished him. He had put his plan, which included, of course, a proper reference to “high regard and respect”—he put it before her with a sort of cheerful assurance, an almost child-like pride at his own cleverness in having thought of anything so practical. Her dismay, and instant negative, wounded him; but he was really more surprised than offended.

“Why!” he said, in amazement, and swallowed the rest of the sentence: “what *do* you

R. J.'S MOTHER

want?" He changed this naïve expression of astonishment to: "Why, but, Mrs. Holmes, think of R. J.!"

But apparently she would not think of R. J.; she would not even discuss the matter, until his half-irritated persistency drew from her the admission that she had no personal objection to him. "Of course," he said, "if you object to me, I would not think of urging you."

"Oh no, oh no," she broke in, hurriedly; "that isn't it."

"Well, then! if you don't object to me, why isn't it a very sensible arrangement?—for you can't deny it would be a good thing for R. J."

"It's sensible enough, if you only look at it from that point of view," she said, "but—"

"That's the only point of view from which you can look at it," he declared—and then stopped, abruptly, because she could not restrain a smile. He suddenly remembered that a proposal of marriage was sometimes looked at from another point of view. "Of course," he stammered, "I know you couldn't care a copper about me, personally. This is just a common-sense proposition, based upon sincere regard and respect on my part. Don't you think you can put up with me, Mrs. Holmes, for R. J.'s

R. J.'S MOTHER

sake? Just think what a difference it would make in his life!"

She put her hands over her face, and he saw that she quivered. "It is a temptation," she said, in a low voice—"when you put it that way."

And of course Nathaniel "put it that way" more earnestly than ever. But she looked at him with sombre eyes.

"Listen; it wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair to you. No; I won't do it."

"Fair to *me*? Why, bless your heart, I shall like it exceedingly! I mean I shall like it on my own account. Please believe that I am perfectly selfish."

"It wouldn't be fair to you," she repeated. And when, encouraged by feeling that he had only this last whim to overcome, he insisted that he was really the beneficiary, she broke in, harshly: "I tell you, you don't know me."

Roberts gave her a sudden, silent look; then he said, quietly: "Mrs. Holmes, I know that you are a kind woman, and a good mother; that's all I need or desire to know. We won't make any pretences, either of us. I am much older than you, and you are wrapped up in R. J.; but we are good friends. Now, consider-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ing this, have you any right to deprive the boy of the opportunity I offer him?"

"Oh, I *ought* not to do it," she said. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, and looked at him—"no, no, I ought not to do it!"

"But you will," Roberts said, gravely. There was a long pause. Then she said, with an intensity that made her voice harsh: "I wouldn't think of it if it wasn't for Dicky; oh, I *wouldn't*; indeed I wouldn't! You'll believe that, Mr. Roberts?" Nathaniel could not help a rather rueful smile, for, after all, he was a man, and to be regarded only as a check-book made him feel a little blank for a moment. "It isn't fair," she said, faintly; and held out her hand.

Nathaniel took it in his kindly, passionless clasp. "It is perfectly fair," he said; and left her without another word.

The next time they met, R. J.'s satisfaction brought everything back to the common-sense basis upon which Mr. Roberts had made his offer. "Bully!" said R. J. "He's all right, mother; it will be nice to live at his house." And he kept assuring Roberts that he had done well for himself. "I tell you, you're lucky! You'll like living with mother. She's splendid."

"Well," said Roberts, "you can begin to

R. J.'S MOTHER

pack up; we'll go home next week." Then he fell into somewhat nervous thought: *Frances!* "When did you write your last letter to Miss Blake, R. J.?"

"Day before yesterday; I don't have to do it again for five days," R. J. congratulated himself.

"I'll write in a day or two myself; I think my eyes are equal to it now," Mr. Roberts said. But his eyes—or something else—put the letter off so that the hated bulletin fell to poor R. J. after all. "Just say I am getting better; I'll write myself, later," Mr. Roberts said. R. J. sighed, and got through his task as quickly as possible:

"Mr. Roberts says his eyes are some better. He says the weather is warm here. He hopes you are well. He is well. He can read some. He and mother are to be married on Tuesday.

"Yours truly,

"R. J. HOLMES."

When Miss Frances Blake read that letter she really felt faint. It took her several minutes to get her wits together sufficiently to burst into tears; but the tears relieved her, and between her sobs she said to the Blake cousin, who, terrified, was offering smelling-salts: "It



“I HAVE ALWAYS SAID HE WOULD DO IT”

R. J.'S MOTHER

is just what I said would happen. I am perfectly prepared for it."

"But what? Prepared for *what?* Dear Frances, what is it? Do control yourself!—you alarm me."

"You may well be alarmed," said Miss Blake. "My sainted Nettie! But I am not surprised. You will bear me witness that I have always said he would do it."

An illuminating flash of memory informed Miss Harriet. "You don't mean," she gasped, "that Nat is going to be—*married?*"

"I do. Nathaniel Roberts is faithless to my sister's memory. And not content with that, he insults that memory by choosing a chambermaid as his second wife."

The Blake cousin gasped. "Nathaniel? A chambermaid? Impossible!" The ensuing explanation assisted her to get her breath. "I don't believe it is a chambermaid; I know Nat: and I won't believe it." Miss Harriet's anger, the slow anger of a gentle person, was mounting in her eyes. "I think you are very hard on him. I have always thought so. Why shouldn't he marry again? He has waited fourteen years. For my part, I think it would have been a thousand times better if he had married right

R. J.'S MOTHER

off—in a year or two. Living alone has made him dull and, I'm afraid, selfish — poor Nathaniel! I've always felt it, and now I've said it."

"You have," said Miss Blake—"you have, indeed! It is unnecessary to say more. You lay yourself open to a peculiar suspicion, Harriet. I will not name that suspicion. It would be vulgar to name it."

Miss Harriet turned very red. "It is vulgar to think it, but I wouldn't stoop to deny it. All I have to say is, if that poor man has found anybody—I don't care if she is a chambermaid!—who can make him happy, I am glad of it."

As she went home Miss Harriet cried under her veil with anger; as for Frances Blake, it was many years since she had been so shaken; she was sick with rage. But not too sick to pack a hand-bag and consult a time-table. In that long journey east the wrinkle between her black eyebrows cut deeper than ever and her lips were pale with purpose. When she reached Nathaniel's hotel and asked if he were in his room, she could hardly control her voice. "No; you needn't announce me," she said; "I will go up. I am his sister. In-law."

R. J.'S MOTHER

As she turned away from the counter a clerk, in pantomime, raised an umbrella over his head, and pretended that his teeth were chattering; but another clerk, blotting Miss Blake's name in the register, did not laugh. "Well, I pity him," he said, "if he's got *her*, on top of this business of poor little Holmes."

In the elevator Miss Blake went over in her mind her opening remarks to her brother-in-law; she did not notice the elevator-man, nor the boy who was carrying her bag, nor did she listen to their chatter: "Well, you young fellows will learn not to monkey with that there freight-machine. If he'd kep' his hands off—"

"Aw, look-a-here, if it had been fastened a' right—"

"It was fastened right enough; he had no call to fool with it. Well, I'm sorry for him; and for his mother; and for No. 302, too. They say he's considerable shook up over it?— Third floor! Fourth door to the right, madam. Here, you! Take the lady's bag."

At No. 302 Miss Blake's hand trembled as she knocked; but the muffled answer within steadied her, and made the fires of battle glow in her eyes. Nathaniel was sitting at a table, writing. For an instant he looked up at his visitor in

R. J.'S MOTHER

bewilderment; then, recognizing her, he pushed his chair back and rose. "What! You? Why, Frances! Where did you come from? Is anything the matter—"

"Yes," said Frances Blake, "something is the matter"—she put her umbrella on the table across his papers and loose checks; then, very slowly, she began to draw off her gloves—"something is indeed the matter. This awful, this terrible thing is the matter."

"Oh," said Nathaniel, "yes—yes. Most terrible!" He sighed, and passed his hand over his eyes. "Sit down, Frances. Yes; most dreadful." He sat down himself, wearily. "But how did you know? Oh, I suppose you saw it in the papers. You are very kind, I am sure."

"I mean to be kind, Nathaniel. That is why I have come—to take you home."

"I meant to go next week," he said, with a surprised look, "but this will delay me."

"No," said Miss Blake, "it need not delay you. I, personally, will settle with these—these persons."

"Settle?" said Nathaniel Roberts, vaguely; "I don't understand. What are you talking about?—what persons?"

"This young man and that adventuress, his

R. J.'S MOTHER

mother," said Miss Blake, her voice, which had been in tense control, beginning to tremble—"these terrible people who have trapped you: an intriguing chambermaid and a bell-boy! And you my sister Nettie's husband!"

"I'd stop, if I were you," said Roberts, slowly; "I see, now, what you are driving at. I thought—for a minute I really made the mistake of thinking that you meant to be kind about the boy. I ought to have known better. But you need have no further anxiety, Frances. My little friend, the boy, is dead."

Miss Blake, her mouth open, stared at him.

"There was an accident. He took it into his head to start the freight-elevator. He was killed—poor little R. J.! The only son of his mother, and she—"

"A *widow*? That explains it; a widow! Of course the young man's death is sad. I am sincerely sorry for his mother—even if she is a widow. And I don't mean to speak against the youth, now he's dead, but—"

"You had better not," said Nathaniel Roberts. "He shall not be spoken of in my presence except with respect. We will bring this interview to a close, if you please. I will, however, say that the lady who did me the honor

R. J.'S MOTHER

to say she would marry me, did so merely because it was the conventional way of letting me join my forces to hers in bringing up and educating her son, in whom I was deeply interested. It was a sacrifice to her to do this, and it commanded my profoundest gratitude and respect. This terrible accident makes such a sacrifice on her part unnecessary. She told me so, after the funeral. I was, of course, obliged to submit to her decision. You see, you need not have been afraid that I should get a little happiness out of life, Frances; you might have spared yourself the journey. I will ring for a porter to take your bag down-stairs."

Nathaniel turned to the table, and gathered up his papers. There were no adieux; but if the poor old Blake cousin could have seen Miss Frances's cringing face as she left No. 302, she would have been avenged! When Mr. Roberts heard the door close, he said something under his breath. And then Miss Blake was forgotten; he had other things to think of. . . .

It was not that he grieved, as the bewildered, broken woman in the yellow brick apartment-house was grieving. He had not loved R. J. Paternal emotion had been buried thirteen years before, in Boy's grave, and not even honest R.

R. J.'S MOTHER

J. had revived it; but he had liked the lad thoroughly, and liking had made life interesting; and now he must go back to a life without an interest. Perhaps, in a way, he could have borne grief better than the bitterness of this half-angry disappointment. It had been his task to tell the poor mother the dreadful news of R. J.'s swift and painless death; she had received it with a stoicism that woke some memory in his mind of those days when he, too, "did not shed a tear." Roberts would have taken charge of everything, and spared her the agonizing details of Death, but she was jealous to keep for herself every intimate care of the little body that had been so warm and eager and happy. Together they buried the child, and Nathaniel lived over that day when he had looked down into a grave that held all the world, and all he knew of heaven—such a very little grave to hold so much! . . . When it was over, and they sat together in the parlor of the flat where the air was heavy with the white flowers that he had brought that morning, she said, suddenly:

"I had forgotten. Of course, now I won't go back with you. I ought to have said so. I forgot."

R. J.'S MOTHER

And so does death clear away what is unreal and leave only truth that Roberts answered by an assenting silence. At that moment conventional repetition of his offer would have been impertinence; all that had given it dignity and significance had been taken from it; to have repeated it would only have emphasized its emptiness. So he nodded silently. It was not until he got up to go away that he suddenly realized that he had made no protest—and somehow a protest seemed due to the mere pitifulness of the situation.

“I beg,” he said, gently, “that you will not let—*this*, make any difference. Please marry me, dear Mrs. Holmes.”

She looked at him in faint surprise. “Why, of course not,” she said, wearily. And the finality of her voice silenced him. . . . This scene had been in his mind when his sister-in-law descended upon him. “Now, I have nothing to interest me,” he was saying to himself; and then the door opened, and Miss Frances provided him with at least a temporary interest. When she had gone, he wished for a moment that Mrs. Holmes had been willing to carry out that now useless plan, just to punish Frances!

His gust of futile anger drove him up to the

R. J.'S MOTHER

flat, though he had really no reason for going; there was nothing he could do for Mrs. Holmes. He found her in the midst of that most dear, most heart-breaking task, of looking over the dead child's possessions. Ah, if, when we leave the world, we could but take our possessions with us, how much precious pain we would spare those whom we leave behind! It is not the things which have intrinsic value which stab the survivor; they may yet fulfil their owner's wish or interest in some way or other, they may still comfort, or cheer, or serve—it is the little, pathetic, useless things, the worn and shabby things, the things which had some secret meaning of association—what must be done to these things? It is they that crush the heart! There was a small round stone that R. J. carried—Heaven knows why!—in his little pocket-book; a rusty penknife; a ladder constructed from burned matches. . . . What could R. J.'s mother do with these worthless things?

When Roberts came and sat beside her, in speechless sympathy, she stopped her task of sorting out and trying to throw away, to show him all the boy's pictures from the time he was three weeks old up to the last one, taken some six months before. With unsteady fingers she

R. J.'S MOTHER

handed him a twist of paper which held a flaxen curl; and she brought out a little heap of presents that R. J. had made her: a plush picture-frame, a ribbon, a painted celluloid heart pin-cushion—a dozen worthless, precious things. When she wrapped them all up again in a big, white silk handkerchief, she said, in a hard voice:

“I keep thinking: I ought to have told him never to touch the elevator. It wouldn't have happened if I had told him; he was so obedient, you know.”

And Roberts cried out, as if she had touched the quick: “You must not have such thoughts! I know them; they kill! You must not think things like that.”

She shook her head hopelessly. “I keep thinking of it all the time: why—why didn't I tell him?”

“Oh, you poor girl!” Roberts said; “I know. I understand.”

When he got up to go he asked her to write to him sometimes; she promised, but a little vaguely. She went out into the hall with him, and they waited silently while the elevator climbed slowly up and up to her floor. When it stopped, with a wheezy rattle, at the top

R. J.'S MOTHER

landing, he pushed back the sliding-door, and put out his hand; she took it; they neither of them spoke. Then Roberts stepped into the little coop, and began the slow descent. "Poor girl," he said—"poor girl!"

He had forgotten his own disappointment.

When Nathaniel Roberts got home he discovered, with astonishment—as most people do at one time or another in their lives—that he had not been as necessary as he had supposed: the office had got along very well in his absence; Frances's affairs had got along very well; nobody's interests had suffered because he had had for a day an interest of his own. There was no reason, now that his eyes were all right, why he should not settle down into the old rut, and be as dull and comfortable as ever—settle down even to the fortnightly dinner with Miss Blake; for it must be admitted that Miss Blake behaved very well: she wrote her brother-in-law to the effect that she regretted that any perhaps hasty words of hers (the fatigue of the journey must be her excuse for hastiness) had displeased him. She said she felt it a duty to beg his pardon, and that, as he knew, she always tried to do her duty. So she hoped he

R. J.'S MOTHER

would allow bygones to be bygones ("for my part, I am perfectly willing to forgive and forget," wrote Miss Blake), and come to dinner on Sunday next at a quarter to seven. She would be glad, she added, if Nathaniel would make a point of being punctual.

As part of the process of settling down into the rut again, Nathaniel made the point, and arrived at 6.44. But not even dinners with Frances, or the treadmill at the office, brought back the old numbness and comfort; he was restless, and he wondered why. He wrote several times to Mrs. Holmes, and heard from her once. He thought of her a good deal; or, rather, he thought of how she was suffering—poor girl! He winced at that self-reproach about the freight-elevator. "She ought not to allow herself to think of it," he said; "it is dangerous—dangerous. I wish I had asked about the crib; I'll never have the chance to now, I suppose."

When the 22d of November approached he remembered, with a thrill of interest, that the birthday this time meant two boys; then it occurred to him that his purchase might take the form of something for R. J.'s mother, which should reach her on the 22d. But what should

R. J.'S MOTHER

it be? He thought of her little heap of precious rubbish, and his eyes stung. He wondered what she would like? On the 20th he said to himself that he really must make up his mind; but he could not think of anything that would please her. In the afternoon, in desperation, he darted into a jewelry-shop, and said: "Something for a lady, please. Oh—anything; what do they like?" The salesman, it appeared, knew just what they liked; at any rate, he put a little velvet case into his customer's hand, and Roberts departed with a sense of relief. That night he sat smoking, going over the last year, and thinking how different it would all have been if R. J. had lived. Well, he hoped she would like that thing in the velvet box. It occurred to him to look at it. "I think one of her blue hyacinths is prettier," he said to himself, and put the open case down on his table. It was there the next morning when Miss Blake came in early to have a word with him on some business matter before he went to his office. The little diamond, winking in its simple setting, was a spark to powder.

"Why, Nathaniel! You buying jewelry? For whom, may I ask, if it is not impertinent?"

R. J.'S MOTHER

Roberts's silence conveyed his views upon impertinence; then he said: "For a friend."

Miss Blake put the velvet case down and looked at him, her heavy black brows lowering with suspicion. "Nathaniel, I am the last person to be curious; but—for your own sake, it isn't, oh—Nathaniel, it isn't *for that person?*"

"If you mean for my friend, Mrs. Holmes, it is," he said.

They stood looking at each other in silence, each afraid to drop the curb of self-control. Then Frances Blake said: "Nathaniel, I should not be doing my duty if I did not say that this is very unwise. You might arouse hopes. Yes; when Providence removed that poor young man to (I hope) heaven, it kept you from faithlessness to our dear Nettie, and saved you from a marriage which would have been, I am sure, unhappy. When your interest in her son ceased she could have no claim upon you. But if you now encourage her by a gift—"

"You encourage me," said Nathaniel Roberts, "to mind my own business."

Miss Frances Blake took her departure. When your brother-in-law talks about minding his own business, there is nothing else to



"'I MUST HAVE SOMETHING TO TAKE CARE OF,' HE SAID"

R. J.'S MOTHER

do. . . . Nathaniel was never asked to dinner again.

That very night he took the Eastern express. He was going to mind his own business.

"I want you for my own sake," he said, brokenly, and put her hand to his lips.

"No," she said, "not me. You don't want *me*, Mr. Roberts."

"You, and only you," he told her, almost angrily; "don't—don't say things like that," he entreated her.

She stroked his shoulder with her free hand, and smiled; but there were tears in her eyes. "Mr. Roberts, don't you see? I'm not your kind. I'm just—I'm just R. J.'s mother."

"You are the kind I want," he said; "I didn't know it when I asked you. I thought I wanted something else. But it was you, all the time. I want something to take care of. Oh, you don't know how lonely I am! I must have something to take care of. Say 'yes,' R. J.'s mother."

"Mr. Roberts," she began, and stopped and covered her eyes for a moment; he saw that she held her lip hard between her teeth—"Mr,

R. J.'S MOTHER

Roberts, then I must tell you: I can't. . . . I was not married to Dicky's father."

"Oh, my little girl," he said, "my poor little dear girl!" Then he put his arms around her and kissed her.

"I knew that long ago," he said.

THE MORMON



THE MORMON

“AND the worst of it is, they are all such nice people!”

“Why, that’s the best of it, it seems to me. Of course, they all mean well.”

“In a certain way they all do well, too,” Mrs. Strong said, sighing; “really, it is very perplexing. Adèle is the truest friend to him! Why, where would he have been now without Adèle?”

“In the barn-yard, probably,” Henry Austin told her, putting his teacup down on the mantel-piece behind him, “and making, no doubt, an excellent farmer.”

“Farmer? Yes! Plodding about in rusty boots (I declare, I smell the barn-yard now whenever he comes in in his pumps!)—plodding about in his potato-fields all day, and falling asleep over his Shakespeare at eight o’clock in the evening! Exciting life.”

R. J.'S MOTHER

“Not exciting,” her old friend admitted, smiling, “but contented.”

“Well, but, my dear Henry!—he’s contented now; or, at any rate, he ought to be. He’s a successful actor; indeed, I think he is a great actor—and you know I don’t say that lightly. He has an angel of a wife; Dora is the best girl I know. And he has a mother-in-law who is the most charming woman in the world! Now, isn’t Adèle a charmer?”

“Oh, bless my soul, yes—at least, I suppose she is. She always was. You know, I haven’t seen her for a dozen years. But she certainly was a charmer then. I bear the scars still,” he ended, drolly.

“You don’t look like a blighted being,” she told him. “Well, she’s more charming now than when she broke your heart, if such a thing is possible. Dora’s marriage to Augustine was so eminently fitting and Augustine’s success has been wine to her. Sometimes I think she adores it as much as she does him.”

“She had just discovered him when I went away,” Henry Austin said, thoughtfully. He was standing with his back to the fire, looking down at the plump, anxious little old lady on the yellow damask sofa at the other side of the

THE MORMON

hearth. "I remember," he went on, frowning reflectively, "that she spoke to me about him. I told her she had a *flair* for genius; she was always discovering people who could do things. She once thought she had discovered me; she cherished temporarily the belief that I could write. When I didn't she had to admit that I was not *terra incognita*, and of course I ceased to be interesting," he ended, candidly.

"Yes, but she really has a *flair* for genius," Mrs. Strong said; "she has found lots of them. You remember that it was she who discovered Elise Davis's voice? And she scraped up money from all of us to send that Ernst man to Paris—and did you see what the last *Revue des Beaux-Arts* said about him? And she picked up Rose Harris, a little seamstress at one dollar and twenty-five cents a day, and started her in business; and let me tell you, sir, if you had a wife (as you ought to have), and had to pay Harris's bills, you would understand *her* genius! I can't afford a Harris dress oftener than once in two years. Then came Augustine. I suppose you know how she discovered him?"

Henry Austin shook his head, whimsically. "Hazel rod?"

"My dear, she went to spend the summer on

R. J.'S MOTHER

a farm, for economy. Took Dora; Dora was fifteen then. (Mr. Wharton had just died, and we were all thanking Heaven for her release.) And there was this genius, twenty-eight years old; self-educated; refined, too, in a way, though his boots were barn-yardy—and as beautiful as a god. And good. Yes, he certainly is a good man; I am worried enough over the affair, but I know Augustine Ware is a good man. That's what makes it so puzzling. He is good, and Adèle is good, and Dora is an angel!"

"My dear Jane! Do you want them to be bad?"

"Now, Henry, don't be frivolous. But I tell you one thing: there's a good, honest, human badness that isn't nearly so bad as a certain kind of goodness. A goodness that is just a mental philandering—that nobody recognizes."

"Not even the philanderers," Austin said, much amused. "Really, Jane, I don't think you need be cast down, 'long as they're 'appy an' virtuous.'"

"I am cast down; because—Dora—"

"Is the child jealous?"

"No—oh no. She isn't jealous. She's too innocent to be jealous—or too stupid; I don't know which."

THE MORMON

"Same thing," Henry Austin said, laconically.

"Now stop! I won't listen to such horrid, cynical talk. I'm ashamed of you. But, seriously, Henry, it's Mormonism, you know."

"Jane—isn't that 'language'?"

The old lady on the yellow sofa chuckled and sighed. "The situation calls for 'language,'" she said, smoothing the lap of her purple satin gown with a plump, jewelled little hand; "and I only say it to you, Henry. You've been in love with Adèle, and you've dandled Dora on your knee, and you'll take my word about Augustine—he's a good fellow. Yes, Mormonism. Adèle is the wife of his mind, and Dora is the wife of his bosom. And it isn't—pretty."

"It has an ambiguous sound," he agreed, meditatively.

"And yet, you know, it's all so natural," she complained. "Adèle made him. She created him. She introduced him to a finger-bowl and a dress-coat—yes, positively, to a dress-coat. She woke his mind; she unearthed his genius; she pulled innumerable wires (Adèle always was a wire-puller, in her sweet way)—she pulled managerial wires and got him a hearing—a thing he never could have done himself. And once heard, his success was assured. In two

R. J.'S MOTHER

years, Henry, he could make his own terms, positively. Oh yes, a genius, of course. Well, practically, he is hers; he ought to be."

"Then why on earth didn't he marry *her*?" inquired Henry Austin.

"My dear, she was ten years older than he, to begin with. And, anyhow, Dora, at twenty, pretty and good—not too keen, but *so* good; why, it was just the obvious thing to marry Dora! Of course, he thought he was in love with her; but in a way, you see, marrying Dora was a sort of tribute to Adèle—a return for all she had done for him. Adèle was bitterly poor, and yet, of course, he couldn't simply support her out of gratitude. Yes; to marry her daughter was the natural thing to do—and to support his mother-in-law was natural, too. Adèle has every comfort. Why, the man has his yacht. Adèle was off on it all last summer. She's very fond of the water."

"Did Adèle like the match?"

Mrs. Strong sighed and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. "Why, really—I don't know. She said she did. She said it was perfectly beautiful. And Adèle is too honest to lie. If she hadn't been pleased, she could have held her tongue; but she quite gushed—after a

THE MORMON

while. Just at first she seemed to me a little dazed. Lizzie Dean told me she saw her the day that Augustine told her he was in love with Dora, and Lizzie said she seemed sort of dazed; Lizzie said she said, 'I never dreamed of such a thing!' Well, then, afterwards, she gushed. But she is sincere, Henry."

"I must say," he said, "that the marriage seems a sort of poetical justice. Mother finds clod in barn-yard; waves wand; clod turns into fairy prince, marries daughter, and presents mother with a yacht. Yes, as you say, it was fitting."

"That's what I said just at first. But I didn't know that this intellectual *affaire* was going to be kept up."

"And it is?"

"My dear, she lives with them! He can't see himself in a part until she points it out. They go over every word and gesture and inflection together. His gratitude is one of the phases of the mental philandering, you see. Dora, I must admit, is a gentle blank, so far as his art goes. She's a nice little housekeeper; nice little mother; sees that his buttons are sewed on—if such a celestial being has buttons! You see, one woman ministers to his body and

R. J.'S MOTHER

the other to his soul. I don't believe he could live, as an actor, without Adèle; her artistic perception is more exquisite than that of any human creature I ever knew."

"And her moral perception?"

"I tell you, they are good people!" she said, sharply. "I thought you would understand, Henry."

"I guess I understand," he told her; "there are tragic possibilities there, Jane?"

"There are tragic probabilities," she said, frowning. "Now, Henry, this is a dead, dead secret—but look here; here's an illustration of the way things go in that household: When Dora broke her arm last summer, Adèle happened to be ill; I don't know what was the matter—rheumatism, perhaps; proper thing for a grandmother; but, anyhow, she was really pretty sick. Dora has an uncertain heart, and the doctor was afraid to give her ether, so the setting of the bone was a pretty trying business. Adèle was awfully upset about it, quite hysterical, and no possible good. My dear—Augustine had to stay with *her*, if you please!—to calm her, while the doctor fixed that poor child's arm. Did you ever hear of such a thing? He really was distracted, poor fellow,

THE MORMON

I went in that afternoon, and he told me how distracted he had been. 'Poor Mrs. Wharton was so distressed about Dora, I had to be with her,' he said. I felt like—swearing!"

"I should like to hear you swear, Jane."

"Well, I did—inside. But that's the kind of thing that happens all the time. I tell you, Henry, there are more ways than one of breaking the Seventh Commandment."

"Of course she ought not to live with them," Henry Austin said.

"Of course not," Mrs. Strong agreed; "but how are you going to stop it?"

"Unless she finds another genius, I admit that the prospect is not hopeful," he said.

"Dear me, Henry, I wish you were a genius," old Mrs. Strong said, sighing.

And then she gave him a plump hand, and told him to be sure and come to her Thursdays. "You are good-looking still, Henry," she declared, "and maybe I can find a wife for you."

When Henry Austin buttoned his coat and went out into the rainy dusk his face was full of humorous remembrance. . . . He had completely forgotten those scars of which he had spoken to old Jane Strong, though when the

R. J.'S MOTHER

wounds were fresh they had smarted keenly enough. But he thought about them now as he walked along to the club. It was a dozen years ago that he had fallen in love with this sweet-minded and brilliant Adèle Wharton, then newly a widow. There had been no chance for him. . . . She had lived for sixteen years in hell. At the end of that time of bravely borne disgust and shame and pain her tormentor died, and she was free. But the very idea of love-making and marrying was a horror. She could hardly listen to Henry Austin's declaration with decent appreciation of the honor which any good man's declaration of love is to any woman. She had said, hurriedly, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap: "Oh, please, Mr. Austin! No—no, it can't be. It never can be. I—I do thank you—but *please!* No, I can't—love you. I can never love anybody—except Dora."

Henry Austin had listened with downcast eyes and set jaw. Then he got himself together and said, gently, that she must forget it. He would not speak of it again, he said. And he never did. After awhile he left town; and later, it chanced that he was called to live abroad—and he was not sorry. After all, if

THE MORMON

you can't eat your cake, there is no particular happiness in just looking at it. So he settled down in a small consulate in Italy. When his party went out of office he found European life so much to his taste that he stayed on. And he enjoyed himself very well in his way. He certainly was not a blighted being. The wounds had healed. If he had scars, as he said, they never throbbed or stung. They did not throb now as he walked along in the drizzling November twilight, thinking of what Mrs. Strong had told him. In an amiably, impersonal way it occurred to him that he would like to see Adèle again, and little Dora. Dear little slip of a girl Dora was, with pleasant eyes the color of a November leaf; a gentle, honest child, very adoring of her mother. Well, he would like to see them both again.

"Yes," he said to himself, as he sat down at dinner in his club and opened his napkin thoughtfully—"yes, Adèle was a charmer. *Is*, Jane Strong says. And yet she must be fifty. Well, that's the right age for a woman, when one no longer desires to sport with Amaryllis. Charles, you may bring me—the best you've got."

But as he regarded Charles's best, Austin,

R. J.'S MOTHER

with comfortable unconcern, continued to reflect upon the story Mrs. Strong had told him. He was pretty sure that Jane Strong had exaggerated the situation; a man with a pretty girl for a wife can hardly be sentimental, even unconsciously, about his mother-in-law,—even if the mother-in-law does inspire him artistically and is a charmer. But he was inclined to think slightly of a man who depended upon a mother-in-law or anybody else for artistic inspiration. “He ought to stand on his own legs,” Austin thought severely; and remarked to Charles that it seemed strange one couldn’t get one’s claret at the right temperature anywhere out of one’s own house. Then he added to himself that sometime he would observe the Ware situation at first hand. “But I wish they didn’t live so confoundedly far out of town!” Still, he would call some day. However, the day was still deferred, and before it came he met his old charmer at Mrs. Strong’s. There she was—the same erect, slender creature, with beautiful, interested eyes that looked out with eager seriousness from under her soft gray hair; her mouth, a little cold, was large and beautifully cut; there was still a faint color in her cheek. She was,

THE MORMON

of course, not young, and yet one's first impression was of youth; perhaps because of a certain gayety of carriage and a buoyant movement of her head; but, most of all, because of the extraordinary interest of her glance.

"Why, Henry Austin!" she said, holding out her two hands, as eagerly impulsive as a girl. "Why, this is perfectly *delightful!*" In her pleasure she did not release his hand for a moment, but stood holding it in both of hers, smiling, with candid eyes, and saying again, "This is charming, dear Mr. Austin!"

There was such a beautiful friendliness in this honest hand-clasp that suddenly the gray-haired man was conscious of his scars. After that they sat down on the yellow sofa by the fire and talked—or rather, he talked; that was the power of the creature!—a gentle, lovely power of making people interested in themselves. He told her—Heaven knows what he did not tell her!—of the death of a relative which had called him back to America; of his affairs; of his health, even; of those pleasant, trivial European experiences. Nothing great, nothing tragic, nothing noble; just the pleasant, harmless experiences of a pleasant, harmless

R. J.'S MOTHER

man. And then her eye hardened and her mouth grew grave.

"And have you written your book?"

"My book?" he said, a little blankly, and laughed the pleased laugh of the person who is believed in. "Oh yes; you always said I would write a book!"

"I said you *could*," she corrected him, coldly. "You are lazy, you know."

He felt himself grow hot at the roots of his hair at the compliment of her displeasure and confidence. He was suddenly ashamed of all his easy years, in which the purpose of achievement had gradually dried up and blown away. And the scars stung a little.

"I had nothing to write about," he said, easily jocose.

"Yes, you had," she said, calmly.

And then somebody came up to speak to her, and Henry Austin watched her as she moved about, always with that young air of buoyant expectation. Yes, a charmer and a creator. . . . Look at the girl with the voice, and the painter-man, and—Harris! He wondered if she wore one of Harris's dresses? It was a mighty handsome dress anyhow; even to his untutored male eye it was handsome. She plainly had plenty

THE MORMON

of money now. The son-in-law's success meant ease and even wealth to his household, and she was a part of his household. It came over Austin, with a ludicrous sense of his own fatuousness, that he had not said a word about that household, nor the son-in-law, nor little Dora, nor the baby! She had made him talk so much about himself that he never thought of her. And the scars stung a good deal.

"I'm an old fool!" he said to himself, smiling. "But that is the secret of it—her charm is that she makes us find ourselves charming. Well, I must go and see little Dora."

The very next day he went.

"Yes, Mrs. Ware was at home," the man said, "but Mrs. Wharton was not receiving. Would he come this way?" Henry Austin went that way, and found himself in a pleasant room, full of the scent of violets, and with a chuckling wood fire on the hearth. On a round table littered with books a prickly bronze dragon supported on his scaly coils a shaded lamp in a great blue-and-white vase; beside it, sunk in a deep chair, a girl was trying to read, keeping all the while a delicate, detaining hand on a little being in white, who was tumbling about on her lap, and snatching at the book,

R. J.'S MOTHER

and laughing and gurgling, and being told to keep still—"mother's precious!" The girl looked up, a little blindly, narrowing her near-sighted brown eyes, and the child, instantly stern and suspicious, subsided on her shoulder.

"Of course you don't know me, Dora; it is twelve years—"

"Why, yes, I do," she said; "of course I do!" She got up eagerly, the sulky baby hiding its head in her neck. "Mamma told me she saw you at Mrs. Strong's yesterday," she said, and held out her pretty hand.

He sat down on the other side of the fire and laughed. "Well, upon my word! Dora—and a baby! It's absurd; I believe it's a doll."

"A doll!" she said, indignantly. "Sylvia, look at the gentleman! Come, goosie, look at him—"

Sylvia silently burrowed in her shoulder, and Dora gave up in despair. "You little monkey!" she said. "Mr. Austin, she isn't always so silly. And she's the dearest thing that ever was. Well, you shall have some tea, even if Sylvia won't speak to you."

"And your mother? She is well?" he said, taking his tea and looking at her with his kind, amused eyes. "And your husband? Of course,

THE MORMON

I have seen him. My dear, how does it seem to have married a famous man?"

Her face was suddenly illuminated. "You have seen Augustine? In what? Oh, Mr. Austin, isn't he wonderful? You won't mind my saying that he is wonderful, will you? And yet you can't know *how* wonderful he is until you see him playing with Sylvia. Just sitting down on the floor and playing with her like—why, just like anybody! I will let him know you are here; he's in the library. Oh yes, of course I will. Mamma told him all about you last night, and what talent you had. She said that some time you would write a great book. What is it to be about, Mr. Austin? Mamma has a headache, and Sylvia is such a little horse-marine when she gets going that it worries her—when she has a headache. So she has gone to sit in the library, and Augustine went in to cheer her up. I'll go and call him. There! Sylvia darling, do be good and let mother go."

She put the child—a fluff of white and rose and gold—down in her chair, and it gazed solemnly over the cushioned arm at the stranger, while she went to call her husband, who came immediately; the same large, gentle creature, with the wonderful face, whom Austin had seen

R. J.'S MOTHER

on the stage. It was a strange face, at once luminous and frank, and without self-consciousness; yet, lying behind the simplicity, there was the most profound emotional complexity, held always in the leash of simple goodness. He sat down and took his little girl on his knee, and as he and Austin talked he hugged the child furtively, whispering to her once or twice, and Sylvia chuckled loudly and whispered back again. Dora looked on like a Madonna.

A moment later Adèle Wharton entered, and, somehow, they all turned to her as people turn to the sun—except, indeed, the baby, who was displeased at being placed hastily on the floor while her father got up to fetch a footstool for grandmamma, and her mother rose to put a little silk shawl over her shoulders, and Henry Austin moved the bowl of violets towards her—he had the feeling that he must do something, and the violets were nearest to hand.

“Does Sylvia bother you, Mrs. Wharton?” Augustine said. “I’ll carry her up-stairs if she does.”

“Bless her little heart, no! If she won’t suddenly roar,” she said; but the husband and wife exchanged an uneasy glance, and Dora slipped away with the child in her arms. When

THE MORMON

she came back the other three were talking about Augustine's last part; or, rather, his mother-in-law was talking—very calmly, with extraordinary insight into the character, but with a cold-blooded incisiveness that made Henry Austin wince. The actor did not wince; he stood, his elbow on the mantel-piece, listening. "Yes," he agreed—"yes; you are right; but if—" And then they fell into argument.

Dora and Henry Austin listened—she, humbly; he, with a sense of watching something grow—watching clay take immortal form under the modeller's hands!

"You won't mind our talking about it?" Augustine said, turning apologetically to his guest. "I didn't mean to get into it, but I don't dare to lose Mrs. Wharton's idea, even when I don't quite agree with her."

"You will agree with me," she said, simply, "when you think it over. I maintain, Mr. Austin, that where Augustine is confronted by the fact of his own complicity in the crime—you remember, he has not been conscious of complicity?—I mean in the Prince's part;—his astonishment will keep him silent for a perceptible space of time. The Prince will not instantly cry out and deny it. Augustine

R. J.'S MOTHER

vociferates at once in his astonishment. That is a false note. Unless the Prince is silent—while he is taking it in, so to speak—he has *not* been unconscious that he had been treacherous. Do you see?”

“How do you know so much about crimes?” Henry Austin said, frivolously. “Are you an unconscious pickpocket, dear lady?”

“If I were not unconscious I would declaim the instant you found me out,” she said, laughing, “as Augustine does.”

A week later, when Henry Austin saw Ware again in this part, it was obvious that he had come to agree with his mother-in-law, for in the Prince's silent second of horrified self-revelation, Augustine's creator's hand was obvious.

“It's just what Jane Strong said,” Mr. Austin reflected; “she makes the part for him. Yes; that silence is great art!”

Austin, with a grin at his own absurdity, did actually begin that winter the long-delayed book; and, consequently, he saw very much of the Ware household. The intimacy began in his going out often to Augustine's house to ask Mrs. Wharton's advice about his writing; but twice she went off “on the road,” as she ex-

THE MORMON

pressed it, gayly, to see her son-in-law in one or another part, so that, finally, the author had to plod along by himself. But the habit of going to Linden Hill had been started, and he kept it up, even when his critic was not there. His calls began to grow very frequent about the middle of January, during Mrs. Wharton's first absence. He had dropped in after dinner one night, and found Sylvia half asleep in her mother's arms.

"I ought to have put her to bed," Dora said, rather shamefacedly, "but the evenings are so long."

After that Henry Austin came certainly four nights out of seven; and considering that the distance was such as to make a cab too expensive and reduce him to the detested cable-cars, this implied devotion. Dora had not gone with her husband on his tour, for Sylvia could not be pulled about the country in zero weather. And when, in February, Augustine, in a fever of anxiety for criticism, summoned Mrs. Wharton, she had to go alone.

"So behold me!" Adèle Wharton said, with one archly lifted eyebrow—"I am to be a grandmotherly first-nighter! Isn't it absurd? I start to-night."

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Mamma is so good to Augustine and me," Dora said, the next day, when Henry Austin found her alone, playing with the baby on the hearth-rug.

"I see by the morning paper that he is going to bring out one of the old comedies in St. Louis," Austin said. "Which one?"

"Oh," Dora said, "dear me! how stupid I am! I meant to ask mamma, but she went off in such a hurry she forgot to tell me, and I forgot to ask her. I really am ashamed. She just said he had written 'about the old comedy scheme.' I must remind him to tell me."

"And she has actually gone to St. Louis?" Austin said. "She is as energetic as she was twenty years ago. My dear, I doubt if you will ever be as young as your mother."

Dora pulled Sylvia's frock straight, and put her cheek against the little yellow head. "I guess not," she said. "I'm not clever, you know."

"You are better than clever," he told her, smiling; "you are good."

At that she raised her head and said, sharply, but laughing, "Well, but mamma is good *and* clever; I don't see why I couldn't have combined them both, too!"

THE MORMON

She pulled herself up from the floor a little wearily, and, sitting down in her low chair, began to make tea for her visitor; then she noticed that he looked tired, and when he confessed to a cold her maternal concern was delicious. Austin laughed, but he liked it. All men like it; they like to be coddled—and they despise the man who is coddled. Dora shook her head anxiously; then she went up-stairs and brought back a small bottle, and counted out into the pink palm of her young hand four two-grain quinine pills.

“You will take one now, and three when you go to bed. And—well, I think I’ll give you three for to-morrow, too; one at breakfast, one at noon, one at night.”

“Oh, I guess I’ll just take a drink of whiskey when I go to bed—” he began, meekly.

“Quinine is much better for you,” she told him, sternly. “And telephone me in the morning, so I can see whether you ought to go out. Now, you will be careful, won’t you, Mr. Austin?”

When he went away she insisted upon calling a carriage, and wanted to bundle him up in one of Augustine’s overcoats. But there he drew the line. He went back to town amused, but,

R. J.'S MOTHER

somehow, warmed about his heart. When you are a bachelor, and fifty-five, pretty and serious young women do not often concern themselves with your quinine pills. He was housed for a day or two, and when he went back to report himself cured she was very stern with him about the care of his health.

"What does Augustine do without his head nurse?" he said, kindly.

Dora sighed. "I often worry a good deal about him. Mamma doesn't know anything about sickness; and, of course, Augustine is just a man. But I gave him a little medicine-case, and wrote out directions as to what he was to do if he took cold or anything. But I do worry."

She used to talk to this kind old friend very simply and intimately of her husband and his goodness and his greatness. And sometimes, after such a talk, he would hear her sigh.

"I don't know anything about art, Mr. Austin," she said, humbly, "but I know Augustine is wonderful."

"Yes, he is wonderful," he would assure her, heartily. "But it's hard for him to have to be away from you and Sylvia so much. I know that must be a great trial to him."

"SHE USED TO TALK OF HER HUSBAND"



THE MORMON

She would look at him, when he said things like this, with wistful eyes, and say: "Yes, of course."

Dora did not know many people, though her mother's circle was very large. She was too shy to make acquaintances readily; and as for making friends, she did not want any; Sylvia and Sylvia's father filled her little heart. But by-and-by she made room in it for Henry Austin. Indeed, she could hardly help it, for the silent, elderly man, with those amused eyes, somehow would not be denied; he came to see her, and sat by her fireside like a faithful, grizzled old dog; and by-and-by Sylvia got so used to him that she sat on his knee while Dora made his tea, and Dora herself confided her troubles about her parlor-maid, or her fears that it would be extravagant to get a new hat. "I don't *really* need it, do I," she would say, anxiously. And Austin made haste to assure her that she did need it. In fact, Henry Austin began to think that little Dora needed, and must have, everything she wanted.

And so the winter slipped away, and the girl and the baby sat by the fire and thought and talked of the husband and father's triumphs. The little wife carried Augustine's letters about

R. J.'S MOTHER

with her in a small gray bag lined with pink silk and sweet with orris; she would take them out and read them over and over; when it was too dark to see to read, just before the lamps were lighted, she would bend down to catch the firelight on the brief pages, or else repeat them to herself out of her heart. He told her in every letter how much he owed her mother; and he kept Mrs. Wharton so constantly with him that she told his manager she belonged to the troupe, and should presently begin to draw her salary. Then, in April, the company came back to town for a month's engagement. And by that time Henry Austin had grown to feel a great tenderness for Dora—the little, lonely mother, hearing in the silent winter days the echoes of the extraordinary applause that followed her husband's progress through the country. On some of those faithful visits to Linden Hill, Austin had felt a vague anger at his old love; yet when she came back in the spring, a week or two before her son-in-law, and took her pleasant place in her little world, he forgot his anger. Why should he be angry? Adèle took so seriously and nobly her great responsibility; she knew, without any false flutter of negations, that Augustine Ware

THE MORMON

would probably have been in his barn-yard yet if she had not divined his genius—and now, here he was, a man truly great in his profession, a man of real moment in his world! She spoke of him often to her old friend, yet not so often that Austin felt himself forgotten or his own possibilities overlooked. And as there was always the compliment of severity and displeasure at his indolence, he felt, somehow or other, as if he were as important to her as was her famous son-in-law. And so, in spite of the dreary winter, in spite of Dora's lonely little face, his anger gradually evaporated. In fact, those scars, quiescent during the winter, stung very perceptibly.

In the fortnight before Augustine's return, Mrs. Wharton was busy making plans for his London season, certain arrangements for which had been left in her hands. She spoke of these plans to Dora, but only very briefly. "Not yet," she would say, with shining eyes. "Wait till I get things clear in my own mind. Then I'll tell you all about it."

And Dora waited.

When Ware came home the first thing he said was that Dora was thinner; but he had hardly time to speak of it and scold her for it,

R. J.'S MOTHER

a worried wrinkle coming between his eyebrows, and to kiss Sylvia, and say she was a villain to have let her mother get thin, when Adèle called him into the library to write an answer to a despatch.

"I think you had better decline," she said, "because—" and then the door closed.

Dora picked up a bit of sewing, and Henry Austin saw that she put the needle in with uncertain fingers. He got up abruptly, and said good-night, and betook himself to his club.

"Mormonism!" he said to himself, as old Mrs. Strong had said six months before. "And yet they are both such good people!"

As he looked on during the next few weeks the anger began to come back. And one day—it was Sunday, and all morning he and Dora sat outside the closed door of the library, waiting for Augustine to finish a discussion with his mother-in-law, and take a walk with Dora and Sylvia,—on that Sunday morning Adèle Wharton's old friend asked himself a question: "Well, what are *you* going to do about it, Henry Austin?"

He asked it hotly, and the scars did not throb at all.

Well, there was, of course, one thing he could

THE MORMON

try to do; and very likely he would not succeed. He had failed the first time he tried, and he had more to offer then. Still, he could try. . . . So the very next afternoon he gathered together the manuscript on which he had worked all winter—a pleasing, well-bred, ineffective manuscript, much like the pleasing, well-bred man himself—and he took it to the creator out at Linden Hill.

She was in the library writing notes at Augustine's great mahogany table, with its clutter of silver furnishings, and its orderly piles of docketed papers and letters—the orderliness was hers. She looked up at Henry Austin, over her glasses, with charming welcome.

“How nice this is! What! did you bring your manuscript? Good. I want to talk to you about it.”

Austin let her talk, and bore the relentless surgery of her criticism without flinching, for the reason that he hardly heard it. She was genuinely interested, however, and after the first ruthless slashes, she found herself able to praise and to appreciate. But in the midst of her appreciation, Henry Austin suddenly pushed the manuscript aside, and, leaning over the table that was between them, he said;

“Adèle, I think you had better marry me.”

R. J.'S MOTHER

Her dumfounded look was not flattering, but the momentary speechlessness of her astonishment gave him the opportunity to explain.

"You know I wanted you years ago, and I want you now. But never mind that. I think you'd better marry me for other reasons—that is, if you don't dislike me, Adèle?"

"Of course I don't dislike you," she said, when she could get her breath, "but, my dear Henry, you are raving crazy! I am a *grand-mother*. Have you forgotten that?"

"Not at all. That's the reason we had better get married. Adèle, you are robbing Augustine, and you've got to stop it."

In her bewilderment she was not immediately angry. She repeated, vaguely: "*Robbing?* Augustine? Yes; you are certainly mad!"

"No, I'm not mad—at least, not in the sense you mean. It's like this: You've made Augustine—well and good. You dug him up out of a barn-yard and put him on his feet on the stage—well and good. Now let him alone! He has a right to be let alone. Stop being a crutch to the fellow. Let him walk; let him run; let him fly if he can. Or else let him tumble down in the ditch. But do, for Heaven's sake, let him alone!"

THE MORMON

By this time the anger in his eyes had kindled a flame in hers; a dark color came up into her face.

“Mr. Austin, I am at a loss to understand—”

“I think I could make you understand,” he said, dryly, “but I’d rather not.”

“Rather not?”

“Let me make what I said about Ware clearer. You know, Adèle, how profoundly I admire his genius, and how entirely I know that his genius would never have found expression without you? Well, there has come a point in his development when your personality is dominating it, and limiting it, and—”

Austin paused, in a cold perspiration of effort. To tell a small truth and keep quite clear of a large truth was not easy to a temperamentally truthful man. “You are cramping the man fearfully—ah—I should say a good deal. You know I speak as an old friend, Adèle?”

There was a pause. Anger died out of her eyes, and her face whitened.

“You think I am—injuring Augustine?” she said, in a low voice.

“My dear Adèle, there is not the slightest doubt of it.”

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Henry, do—do other people—think so?"

"Indeed they do!"

She put her hands over her face in silence, while Austin cruelly repeated certain illuminating gossip that he had heard. He saw her shiver.

"You mean to be a true friend," she said, brokenly. "I know you do. I thank you."

At that he winced; but he said, cheerfully: "Well, then, we'll go off, you and I; we'll go abroad and leave him. He'll land on his feet. He is the right stuff. But if you stay—"

"I will go," she said, in a low voice.

"Of course," he said. "Well, we'll get married at once, and—"

"Oh no. No, I don't mean that. I'll just go away."

"You can't do that, Adèle," he told her, bluntly. "Augustine and Dora would never consent to it. You know they wouldn't. But if they think you are going to be married, and have your own life—if you undertake me, Adèle, and create me, as you might say—they will never see through it; they will never understand why you do it."

She shook her head, speechlessly; and then, a moment later, she said, in a low voice: "It is impossible. But I thank you."



"DORA LOOKED UP AT AUSTIN AND HELD OUT TWO SHAKING HANDS TO HIM"

THE MORMON

“No! no! that’s the only way out of it; it’s all settled,” he said, keeping, with an effort, the note of interrogation out of his voice. “You consent—” He stopped abruptly, for the door opened and Dora entered. “Oh,” he said, getting rather red, as an elderly lover might well do—“oh, here’s Dora; Dora, listen—”

“Don’t,” her mother said, faintly.

But Henry Austin went on, glibly: “Dora, I say—where’s Augustine? Oh, there you are, old man; and Sylvia too. Good. Well, my dear people, I have a piece of news for you—”

“Henry!” Adèle Wharton interrupted.

“Dora, my dear, your lovely mother has promised to marry me, and we are going abroad!”

There was a moment’s silence. Augustine Ware blanched suddenly.

“What?” he said, under his breath. “*What?*”

Dora sat down quickly, as if faint; then there were confused outcries and exclamations.

“But,” Ware began, violently, and stopped; for Dora rose and ran to him, sobbing as she ran. She put her arms about his neck in a storm of tears.

“Oh, Augustine! oh, Augustine!” she said; and cried so that Ware lifted her in his arms and carried her to a chair, into which she tum-

R. J.'S MOTHER

bled in a sobbing heap. They all stood about her in helpless distress, Adèle saying, reproachfully:

“Oh, Henry! how could you? Dora—darling!—I won’t do it; I won’t leave you. Oh, Henry, how could you frighten her so? I won’t leave you, Dora, child.”

At that Dora lifted her head from Augustine’s shoulder, and stared, catching her lip between her teeth, and shaking very much. The mother knelt beside her, stroking her poor little thin hand.

“Darling, Henry didn’t understand; I had not said *yes*; he thought I did, but I didn’t; and I—”

Dora looked up at Austin and held out two shaking hands to him. “Oh, Mr. Austin! *yes*—she will. Augustine, you will make her? Yes, mother, *yes*. I am glad to—to—to have you happy. Say *yes*! Augustine, tell her, *tell her* to say *yes*!”

Augustine, very pale, stammered something ending with a vague “Of course, we want you to be happy; but—”

Henry Austin swore under his breath; then, setting his jaw, he looked from Ware to Dora, and back again to Ware. Instantly Augustine’s

THE MORMON

face crimsoned. "No!" he said, angrily; "nothing of the kind! You—"

But the other man was not listening; he turned away, and, stooping down to help Adele to her feet, said, in her ear:

"Tell the child you will, for Heaven's sake! *Can't you understand?*"

And she, looking at the husband and wife, stood dumb before them.

"We're going to be married next month, Dora, my dear," Austin said.

Adèle, still speechless and very white, smiled, and gave him her hand.

MANY WATERS

MANY WATERS

I

“WELL?”

“True bill; I’m awfully sorry.”

Thomas Fleming took his cigar out of his mouth, and contemplated the lighted end. He did not speak. The other man, his lawyer, who had brought him the unwelcome news, began to make the best of it.

“Of course, it’s an annoyance; but—”

“Well, yes. It’s an annoyance,” Fleming said, dryly.

Bates chuckled. “It strikes me, Tom, considering the difference between this and the *real thing*, that ‘annoyance’ is just about the right word to use?”

Fleming leaned over and knocked the ashes from his cigar into his waste-basket. He was silent.

“As for Hammond, he won’t have a leg to

R. J.'S MOTHER

stand on. I don't know what Ellis & Grew meant by letting him take the case before the grand jury. He won't have a leg to stand on!"

"Give me a light, will you, Bates? This cigar has gone out again."

"What has Hammond got, anyhow?" Bates continued, pulling a box of wax matches out of his waistcoat-pocket. "What's he got to support his opinion that you pinched \$3000 from the Hammond estate? His memory of something somebody said twelve years ago, and an old check. Well, we won't do a thing to 'em!"

Fleming rose, and began to pull down his desk top with a slow clatter. "Hammond's a fool," he said, "and you'll punch a hole in his evidence in five minutes. But it's—well, as you say, it's 'annoying.'"

The lawyer got up briskly, and reached for his hat. "What we want now is to get the case near the head of the list as soon as we can. Get it over! Get it over! Then, if you want revenge, we can turn round and hit back with 'malicious prosecution'!" He laughed, good-naturedly, and shrugged himself into his overcoat.

His client stood absently locking and unlocking his desk. "I suppose it will be in the evening papers?" he said.

MANY WATERS

"Oh, I guess so; the findings of the grand jury were reported at eleven this morning. Plenty of time for the first editions."

"Then I'll take an early train home," Thomas Fleming said, quickly. "My wife—" he paused.

"Doesn't Mrs. Fleming know about it?" the lawyer asked, with a surprised look.

"No," the other man said, gloomily; "I didn't want her to worry over it, so I didn't tell her. But, of course, now she's got to know."

"Yes," Bates said, sympathetically; "but, after all, Tom, it's a small matter; its only a nuisance. You tell her I say it's a sure thing."

Fleming let his key-ring drop, jingling, into his pocket. Except for the occasional faint clangor of cars down in the streets, the room, high up in the big office building, was quiet; but its quiet was the muffled, inarticulate never-ending roar of living, rising from below. Fleming sighed, and, turning his back to his lawyer, stared absently out of the window. Before him, in the afternoon dusk, lay the struggling, panting city. Far off to the south he could see the water, and the ferry-boats crawling like beetles back and forth. Below, the deep cañons of the streets were blurred with creeping yellow fog; but higher up, above the crowd-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ing roofs and chimneys and occasional spires, the air was clearer; it was full of tumultuous movement—sudden jets of white steam ballooning from hundreds of escape-pipes; shuffling, shifting coils of black smoke; here and there the straining quiver of flags, whipping out from their masts; and, over all, the leaden November skies. Fleming, his hands in his pockets, stood staring and listening, with unseeing eyes, unhearing ears. The lawyer behind him, at the office door, hesitated.

“Fleming, really, it isn’t going to amount to anything. Of course, I know how you feel about Mrs. Fleming, but—”

The man at the window turned round. “Rather than have her disturbed, I’d compromise on it. I’d pay him. I’d—”

The lawyer raised his eyebrows. “This time, I think, Hammond is honest. I guess he really believes he has a case; of course, Ellis & Grew know better, but they are sharks, and you’d be encouraging blackmail to compromise. Anyway, you couldn’t do it. Grew volunteered the information that their man ‘couldn’t be bought off’; he meant to put it through, Grew said. I told him they’d got the wrong pig by the ear. I told him that you weren’t

MANY WATERS

the kind of man who purchases peace at the cost of principle. They're shysters, and I gave 'em plain talk. Now, don't let Mrs. Fleming take it to heart. Tell her I say it will be a triumph!"

He went off, laughing; his client, looking blankly out of the window again, heard his step in the corridor, and then the clang of the elevator door. Thomas Fleming stood staring out over the house-tops, absorbed in frowning thought, until suddenly the gray afternoon was stabbed by the flickering glare of arc-lights; and at that, with a start, he looked at his watch. Then he took up his black cloth bag and poked about in it among some papers; then unlocked his desk, and found what he had been looking for—a box of candy for his wife. He slipped it into his bag, and a minute or two later he was down in the muddy dusk of the street. As he moved along with the steady surge of the homeward-bound crowd he looked doubtfully into the flower-stores; he wished he had bought violets for Amy instead of candy; he had taken her candy last Saturday. He debated whether he had not better get the violets, too, but decided against them, because Amy was stern with him when he was extrava-

R. J.'S MOTHER

gant for her sake. She never saw extravagance in any purchase he made on his own account! He smiled to himself at the thought of her sweet severity.

"Amy keeps me in order," he used to say, whimsically; "she insists that I shall be *her* best; it appears that my own best isn't good enough for her!" This she would always deny, indignantly, and indeed justly; for Thomas Fleming stood on his own legs, morally, in his community. But in the ten years of their married life no doubt her ideals had, in small matters, created his. With his indolent good-nature, he had found it easier to agree with Amy's delicate austerities of thought than to dispute them. Her hair-splitting in matters of conscience always amused him, and sometimes touched him, but he accepted her standards of duty with real tenderness—which, for all practical purposes, was as good as conviction. Gradually, too, she pushed him, gently, before he knew it, into civic affairs; not in any very large way; perhaps hardly more than in a readiness to do his part as a citizen; but such readiness was sincere, and had given him a reputation for public-spiritedness in which Amy took a quiet pride. He had never had

MANY WATERS

time, though he had had opportunity, to hold office, because his business demanded his entire energy; and, in fact, he had to be energetic, for he had hardly any capital, his income being almost entirely dependent upon his earnings; so he was not at all a rich man—except, indeed, as he was rich in the honor and respect of the community and the love of a woman like Amy.

But then, if they were not rich in this world's goods, neither were they poor. There had been happy, anxious years, when they were first married, when they had ridiculously little to live on; but in those days Amy had steered their housekeeping bark between all rocks of hardship, as well as past breakers of extravagance. Even now, when things were easier each year, Amy was still prudent and economical—at least, where she herself was concerned.

So Fleming, with a faint smile, forbore to add violets to his box of candy. After all, it was his thought that would bring the delicate and happy color up into her face, not the gift itself. . . . They were very happy, these two; perhaps because they were only two. There had been a baby, but it had only lived long enough to draw them very close together, and not, as sometimes happens, to push them apart again; and

R. J.'S MOTHER

there were many friends. But they were alone in their household and in the real heart of life. Naturally, all the thwarted maternity of the woman was added to the wife's love; and the paternal instinct of the man (which is, for the most part, only amusement and the sense of protecting and giving joy) was centred in his wife. So it was no wonder that that night, going home on the train, he winced at the thought of telling her that that "fool Hammond," who "would not have a leg to stand on," had prosecuted him criminally for misappropriation of funds as trustee of old Mrs. Hammond's estate. The trust had been closed at her death, a month or two before, and the estate handed over to her son—this same Hammond, who "thought he remembered" hearing old Smith say, twelve years before, that he, Smith, had paid the Hammond estate \$17,400 for a parcel of land; whereas Fleming's trustee account put the sum received at \$14,400.

Amy's husband set his teeth as he sat there in the train, planning how he should tell her. Her incredulous anger he foresaw; and her anxiety—the anxiety of the woman unversed in legal matters. He damned Hammond in his heart; and pulled out his evening paper.

MANY WATERS

There it was, in all the shamelessness of the flaring headline: "A Leading Citizen Indicted!" and so on. The big black letters were like a blow in the face. Fleming felt that every commuter on the train was looking over the top of a newspaper at him. He found himself glancing furtively across the aisle to see what page of the paper another passenger was reading; he thanked God that none of the men he knew well were on the five o'clock, so he would not have to listen to friendly assurances of astonishment at Hammond's impudence. His skin was prickly over his whole body; his ears were hot. And he had to tell Amy! He sunk down in the corner of his seat, and pulled his hat over his eyes, in pretence of a nap; then, suddenly, sat bolt upright. The fact was, Thomas Fleming had no experience in disgrace, and did not know how to conduct himself. When the door banged open at his station, he swung off onto the rainy platform and plodded slowly up the lane to his own house. It was a moral effort to go home, but it was almost a physical effort, too; it seemed to him as though his very feet hung back! As the gate closed behind him, he saw an instant crack of light at the front door; and when his foot touched the

R. J.'S MOTHER

lowest step of the porch, the door opened wide, and Amy stood there—it was rarely Jane who let him in, or even his own latch-key.

“Go right into the house! You’ll take cold,” he commanded.

But she drew him inside with eager welcome. “Why, how *did* you manage to get the five o’clock? I heard the gate shut, and could hardly believe my ears! Oh, your coat is damp; has it begun to rain? Hurry! take it off. Then come into the library and get warm.” She possessed herself of one of his hands, so that he had to dive into his bag as best he could with the other, to fish out her box of candy. She took it, smiling, with gay pretence of scolding, and then checked herself. “You look tired, Tom. When you’ve had your dinner (we have a good dinner to-night; I wish you had brought some man home with you!) you’ll feel better.”

He dropped down into his chair by the fire in silence, frowning slightly, and drawing impatiently away from her. Thomas Fleming did not always like to be fussed over; there were times when, perhaps, he endured it with a mildly obvious patience. Every tender woman knows this patience of a good and

MANY WATERS

bored man. Amy Fleming knew it, and smiled to herself, quite unoffended. Something had bothered him? Well, he should not be talked to! But she looked at him once or twice. In her soft gray dress, with her gray eyes, and the sweet color in her cheeks, she brooded over him like a dove. At dinner his silence continued. Amy, being wise beyond her sex, fell into a silence of her own—the blessed, comprehending silence of love. When they came back from the dining-room to the library fireside, she let him smoke uninterruptedly, while she sewed. Sometimes her eyes rested on him, quietly content with his mere presence. But she asked no question. Suddenly, with a half-embarrassed cough, he said:

“Ah . . . Amy—”

“Yes? Tell me; I knew you hadn’t had a good day.”

When he had told her, she sat dumb before him. Her face was white, and her eyes terror-stricken. But that was only for the first moment. Almost instantly there was the relief of anger. She stood up, her delicate face red, her voice strained.

“To accuse you! *You!*”

R. J.'S MOTHER

It was just what Bates had said. The first thought everywhere would be of the absurdity of such a charge against Thomas Fleming.

"It's blackmail," Amy said, trembling very much.

"Of course we shall have no difficulty in throwing them down," he said. "They bring their case, really, on Smith's old check to me for \$17,400."

"I don't understand," Amy said. It had always been a joke between them that Amy did not know anything about business, so she tried to smile when she asked him to explain.

"Oh," he said, impatiently, "it's simple enough. L. H. Smith owed me \$3000—a personal matter. I once sold him some stock; he gave me his note; had to renew two or three times; thing sort of hung fire. You wouldn't understand it, Amy. But when he bought this Hammond property for \$14,400, he made out the check for \$17,400—he'd had a windfall, so he could pay me what he owed me. See? I got my money. Understand?"

"Perfectly," she said. "What a rascal Hammond is!"

"Oh, well, I suppose this time he really thinks he has a case; though on general prin-



"SHE CAME AND KNELT DOWN BESIDE HIM"

MANY WATERS

principles I believe he's equal to blackmail! But he has succeeded in getting from the Smith heirs that old check for the total amount, and I suppose he thinks he has me. He'll find himself mistaken. But it's a nasty business," he ended, moodily; "there will always be people who will think—"

"What do we care what such people think?" she said, passionately.

Her husband was silent. Amy's knees were shaking under her. "Oh, I could kill that man, I could kill him!"

Well as he knew her, he looked at her with astonishment—this mild creature to speak with such deadly, vindictive passion! She came and knelt down beside him; he felt her heart pounding in her side.

"Oh," she said, brokenly, "I know—"

"You know what?"

She spoke very softly. "I know how they felt; those women, 'looking on, afar off.'"

"'Looking on'?" he said, vaguely. And Amy, her face still hidden on his breast, said in a whisper:

"It must have been easier for—for Him, on the cross, than for them to see Him there."

He moved abruptly in his chair; then, with

R. J.'S MOTHER

faint impatience, said she mustn't talk that way. "It's foolish!" he said, irritably. She kissed him, silently, and went back to her seat by the fire.

"I'll get out of it all right," Fleming said; "Bates says so. It's annoying" — he found himself falling back on Bates's word — "but there's nothing to it. You mustn't worry. Bates says Hammond is crazy to undertake it; Smith being dead, and—" Then he stopped.

"I don't worry—in the sense of being afraid that—" she could not even put into words the fear that she did not have. "But to have your name mixed up with anything dishonorable—even though it will come out clear and shining as heaven!—it makes me sort of—it kills me!" she said, panting.

He made no answer. The fatigue of the day was showing in his face—a heavy, handsome face, with a somewhat hard mouth. His wife, controlling herself with an effort that drove the color out of her face, said, quietly:

"Don't let's talk about it, dearest, any more to-night. It's only on the surface; it isn't a real trouble."

He nodded gratefully, and they did not speak of it again.

MANY WATERS

But that night, Amy Fleming, lying motionless in her bed, stared into the darkness until the glimmering oblong of the window told her that dawn had come.

II

"TROUBLE shows us our friends," Amy said, smiling. And indeed it did in the Flemings' case. When the news of the indictment of Thomas Fleming fell upon his community, there was a moment of stunned astonishment; then of protest and disbelief.

"Hammond is up against it," men said to one another. "Fleming? What nonsense!"

The first day or two, while it was still a nine-days' wonder, public confidence was almost an ovation. The small house behind the trim hedges was crowded with Amy's women friends, coming and going, and quoting (after the fashion of women friends) what their respective husbands said:

"*Of course*, Mr. Hammond has no case, Amy, darling! My Tom — or Dick or Harry — says so."

Amy did not need such assurances. She knew her husband! So she held her head

R. J.'S MOTHER

proudly and with certainty. Not certainty of the outcome of the trial—because, secretly, she had the unreasoning terror of most women of sheltered lives for the very word *law*; it meant power—wicked power, even!—the opportunity of evil to get the better of goodness. But her pride and confidence were for Thomas Fleming's honor and goodness and courage. If they put him in jail, if they killed him even! it could make no difference in her certainty, she told herself. She was a little cold when these tender women friends tried to reassure her, quoting the opinions of their menfolk; she did not want, by eager agreement, to imply that she needed reassurance. She said, with gentle dignity, that she was sorry Mr. Hammond was so foolish. Tom had been trustee of the Hammond estate for nearly twenty years, and he had given time and service—"service," she said, the coloring rising faintly in her face, "that mere money could not pay for." And to have the Hammonds turn upon him now! "Though, of course, it is only Mr. Hammond," Amy corrected herself, carefully just; "the rest of the family are nice people. His mother was such an honorable woman. And his wife—I am sorry for his wife." Amy thought a great

MANY WATERS

deal about this wife. "She must know what he is, poor soul!" she said to herself. And, knowing, she could not respect him. And without respect, love must have crumbled away. She said something like this to her most intimate friend, almost in a whisper, because expression was not easy to Amy. "When Mrs. Hammond realizes that he is a blackmailer, what *will* she do!"

"Poor thing!" said the other woman; "but, Amy, I suppose she is fond of him? He has been a good husband, they say."

"A good husband? How do you mean? Kind? A 'good provider'?" Amy said, with a droop of her lip.

"Well, my dear, at least the man has been faithful to her; among all the horrid things that have been said about him, nobody has said—*that*."

"They had better have said 'that'!" Amy said. "Oh, Helen, faithful to her with his body; but what about his mind? Don't you suppose a good woman could forgive the poor, sinful body? But the mind, the sinful mind! It is so much worse."

Her friend looked doubtful. "I suppose it is," she said; "but I think most wives could

R. J.'S MOTHER

forgive the sinful mind more easily than—other things. And she is fond of him,” she repeated.

“Fond of him! when she can’t respect him? Oh, no, no!”

“Perhaps she doesn’t know how bad he is,” the other said, thoughtfully.

“What!” said Amy, “when she has lived with him for fifteen years? Of course she knows him. And I truly pity her,” she ended, simply.

So in spite of her deep resentment at Hammond, Amy felt something like tenderness for Hammond’s wife—losing both respect and love, poor soul!

As the weeks passed before the day set for the trial, Amy grew perceptibly thinner and whiter. For beneath all her certainties the fear of the law remained. She brooded over instances of goodness suspected, of innocent men condemned, of the blunders and mistakes of justice. It was not until three or four days before the trial that Bates realized what even Thomas Fleming had not understood—that she was consumed with *fear*: fear of prison walls, of unmerited disgrace, of her house left unto her desolate. When the lawyer penetrated the tense cheerfulness with which she held herself

MANY WATERS

in Tom's presence, and saw the fright below, he roared with laughter; which, though ill-mannered, was the best thing he could have done.

"You think I'm a fool?" she said, with a quivering smile.

"My dear lady, it would not be polite for me to use such a word; but certainly you—well, you are mistaken."

"Oh, *say* I am a fool," she pleaded; "I would like to think I was a fool! But, Mr. Bates, the law can be made to do such dreadful things. Innocent people have been put into jail; oh, you know they have," she said, her face trembling; "and at night I lie awake and think—" He saw her hands grip each other to keep steady.

"Now let me explain it to you," he said, kindly, "and then you won't be frightened; why, you'll be so sure you'll send out invitations for a dinner-party on the 19th, so we can celebrate! And mind you have plenty of champagne."

Then, very explicitly, he laid before her the grounds of his confidence. Hammond, to start with, was a fool. "He always has been a cheap fellow—a sort of smart Aleck, you know; but

R. J.'S MOTHER

this time he's just a fool." He had fallen into the hands of a shyster firm, who were milking him—"if you'll forgive the slang."

"Oh, go on, go on!" she entreated.

Hammond, being a fool, and having this vague idea about the price paid by Smith for the land, and having secured the old check to prove (as he thinks) that such a price was paid, falls into the hands of these sharks. "They know there is nothing to it, but they think they can pull out a plum somehow," said Mr. Bates. Then, carefully, he told her the story point by point. Briefly, it was that while there was no question that \$17,400 had been paid to Thomas Fleming, Hammond could not disprove Fleming's defence that only \$14,400 of it was to go to the trust, and that the remaining \$3000 was in payment of Smith's debt to him. "See?" said Bates, kindly. As he spoke, the drawn look in her face lessened, and she drew one or two long breaths; and then, suddenly, she put her hands over her eyes, and he knew she wept. This sobered the rather voluble man. He protested, with friendly vociferation, that she must promise him not to give the matter another thought. And she, still trembling a little, looked up, smiling, and promised.

MANY WATERS

And, such being her temperament, she kept her promise. Perhaps it was the rebound from having gone down to the depths of fear; but certainly there was almost bravado in the reaction. She made up her mind to have the dinner-party! Tom would come home, cleared; crowned with the vindication of his own integrity; and he would find love and friendship and respect ready to exult with him. Tom, however, objected to her project.

"It's all right," he said; "it's perfectly safe as far as the verdict goes; but—" He stopped and frowned. It was evident that the plan did not please him. But for once Amy did not consult his pleasure. She had her own views; and she did actually invite a party of old friends to dine with them on the evening when it was expected that the verdict would be given.

III

AMY, in her dove-colored dress, entered the court-room with her husband. During the trial, very quietly, and with a beautiful serenity, she kept her place at his side. If the proceedings troubled her, there was no indication of it. She looked a little tired, and once or

R. J.'S MOTHER

twice a little amused. Sometimes she smiled at Thomas Fleming, and sometimes exchanged a word or two with Mr. Bates. But for the most part she was silent; and her repose was a spot of refreshment and beauty in the dingy courtroom. Bates looked at her occasionally, with rather jovial encouragement; but she displayed no need of encouragement, and returned his smile cheerfully. Once he leaned over and said:

“You make me think of a poem I read somewhere; now, what was the name of it? I can only remember two lines:

“‘In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced or cried aloud!’

That’s as far as I can go; but that’s what you make me think of.”

She turned, smiling, and finished the verse. “It’s Henley’s ‘I am the captain of my soul,’” she said. “I have it somewhere; I copied it once, because I cared so much for it. I’ll read it to you to-night, after dinner.”

“Do,” Bates said, heartily, and turned away to listen to Fleming, who was on the stand. Fleming’s evidence was as straightforward as the man himself. Yes, Smith (now deceased) had paid him, in March, 1887, the sum of

MANY WATERS

\$17,400. Of this, \$3000 was on a personal account; \$14,400 was for a parcel of land belonging to the Hammond estate. The check was made to his order; he deposited it in his own bank account, and immediately drew against it a check for \$14,400 to the order of the trust. Then followed a very clear and definite statement of that money Smith owed him; a debt which he was unable to corroborate by his books, for the simple reason that his books had been burned in the great fire of that year. Over and over, back and forth, round and round, the prosecution went, gaining not an inch.

Indeed, the end was obvious from the beginning. To assert that Thomas Fleming was an honest man was, so Bates told the jury, to utter a commonplace. He was so cheerful and kindly in his reference to the unfortunate Mr. Hammond that the jury grinned. The verdict, Bates declared, was a foregone conclusion. And so, in fact, it was, being rendered fifteen minutes after the jury had been charged.

"And now," said the good Bates, shaking hands with his client, "let's go and get something to eat. Come, Mrs. Fleming, you'll go with us? You look like an army with banners!"

R. J.'S MOTHER

But Amy, with proud eyes, said no; she must go home. "You will come out with Tom this evening?" she said. "Dinner is at half-past seven; you can dress at our house; and, of course, you must stay all night." Bates promised, and Fleming silently squeezed his wife's hand. Amy's heart was beating so that her words were a little breathless, but her eyes spoke to him.

She did not want to lunch with the two men; she had it in mind to go into a church which was near the court-house, and there, alone, in the silence and sacred dusk, return thanks upon her knees. Any deep human experience gives the soul a chance to see God; and when Amy came out from the quiet church into the roar of the street, her face shone like the face of one who has touched the garment hem of the Eternal. . . .

The joyous and beautiful day passed; the afternoon was gay with congratulations; but the succession of friendly calls was fatiguing, and at half-past five she said, courageously: "Now, dear friends, I'll have to leave you! It's delightful to hear all these nice things about Tom, but I must go and lie down, or I shall go to sleep at dinner." So there was more handshaking and gayety, and then, at last, she had

MANY WATERS

the house to herself. She reflected that it would be well to have a little nap, so that she might be bright and rested for the jubilant evening. Oh, that poem Mr. Bates wanted to see! She had forgotten all about it; she must find it before she went up-stairs. But she must first look into the dining-room to be sure about the candles and flowers and wine-glasses—three kinds of wine to-night! Generally Tom had just his glass of sherry; but to-night—! The economical Amy would have broached the tun of malmsey if she had been able to secure it. The dinner, she knew, would be good. She had picked out the partridges herself, knowing well, under her calm exterior, that her market-man, looking at her with sidewise, curious eyes, was thinking to himself: “My! and her husband to be tried for a state-prison offence!” The partridges were superb; and the salmon—Amy’s eyes sparkled with joy at the thought of such extravagance—salmon in February—the salmon was perfect; and the salad, the ices, the coffee—well, they would be worthy of the occasion!

The dining-room was satisfactory, with its ten friendly chairs drawn up about the sparkling table. And her best dress was up-stairs spread out on the bed, with her slippers and gloves;

R. J.'S MOTHER

her flowers—Tom would bring her her flowers! She thought to herself that she would wear them, and then put them away with her wedding bouquet, that had been lying dry and fragrant for all these years with her wedding dress and veil. Sighing with the joy of it all, she climbed wearily half-way up-stairs; then remembered Mr. Bates's poem again, and went back to the library, with an uneasy look at the hall clock. She would not get much of a nap! And the chances of the nap lessened still more, because she could not at once find her *Commonplace Book*, in which she had copied the poem. Taking out one book after another, she shook her head and looked at her hands—these shelves were very dusty; that told a house-keeping story that was disgraceful, she said to herself, gayly. Well, she would look after Jane, now that she could think and breathe again! So, poking about, pulling out one flexible, leather-covered volume after another, her fate fell upon her. . . .

The book looked like her own *Commonplace Book*; Tom had more than once given her blank-books just like his own—bound in red morocco, with mottled edges, and stamped, "*Diary*, 18—." There was a whole row of

MANY WATERS

these books on one of the bottom shelves of the bookcase that ran round three sides of the room, and she had been looking at them, one by one, hurriedly, for she knew she needed that rest up-stairs before the company came. She pulled the books out impatiently, fluttering the leaves over, and putting them back. One or two were her own note-books: but the rest were Tom's memoranda—accounts, notes, etc., etc., back to— “Why, dear me!” said Amy to herself, “they go back to before we were married!”

There was one date that caught her eye; she had heard it repeated and repeated in the last few weeks; she had heard it that very morning in court, when Thomas Fleming had said: “In March, 1887, L. F. Smith paid me in one check, \$17,400; \$14,400 for a piece of land belonging to the Hammond estate, and \$3000 which he owed my personal account.”

The flexible, red-covered diary marked 1887 drew her hand with the fascination which comes with remembered pain. Ah! how she had suffered every time that date fell like a scalding drop of fear upon her heart! It is not true of spiritual pain that one remembereth no more the anguish for joy that a blessing has been born

R. J.'S MOTHER

into the soul! She shivered as she opened the book. It occurred to her, with vague surprise, that this book would probably have settled the whole matter, if Tom had only remembered it. He had shown in court that records of that year had been among certain office books burned in the great March fire, when the building in which he had his office had been destroyed. Yes, this book might have cleared the whole matter up, easily and quickly, for, as she saw at a glance, here were entries about the Hammond Trust. She forgot her fatigue, and the nap she ought to have; she forgot the poem altogether; she sat down on the floor, running the pages over eagerly. It occurred to her, as a climax of the successful day, that she would bring this book out at dinner (if she could only find something about the \$14,400!), and show it as her final triumph. Then her eyes fell on the figures \$17,400.

“Received from L. H. Smith, to-day, \$17,400 for Hammond property, in Linden Hill.” Then the comment: “A whacking good price. I hardly expected to get so much.” The significance of this brief statement did not penetrate her joy. She began eagerly to look again for the other figures—and then turned back, per-

MANY WATERS

plexed. \$17,400 for the Hammond property? Suddenly her eye caught another familiar sum—\$3000. Ah, now she would find it! Yes, verily, so she did. . . . “Borrowed \$3000 from Hammond Estate to pay back money borrowed from Ropes Estate.”

Suddenly it seemed to this poor woman, sitting on the floor in the dark corner of the library, her fingers dusty, her whole slender body tingling with fatigue—it seemed as if something fell, shuddering, down and down and down, in her breast. Strangely enough, this physical recognition informed her soul. She heard herself speak, as one falling into the unconsciousness of an anesthetic hears, with vague astonishment, words faltering unbidden from the lips. “No—no—no,” came the body’s frightened denial.

Then, in silence, the Soul: “He did it. He did it.”

It was characteristic of Amy that she sought no loophole of escape. It never occurred to her that there could be an explanation. There were the figures; and the figures meant the facts. “*A certain man named Ananias*” (so, suddenly, the words ran in her mind) “*sold a possession . . . and kept back part of the price.*”

R. J.'S MOTHER

Out in the hall the half-hour struck, muffled and mellow. Then silence.

“God, if he did it, I can’t live—can’t live. *God?*”

Then again the body’s futile denial: “No—no—no.”

Suddenly the happenings of the day seemed to blur and run together, and there was a moment, not of unconsciousness, but of profound indifference. Her capacity for feeling snapped. When she tried to rise, her whole being was sick; so sick that again the soul forgot or did not understand, and heard, with dull curiosity, the body saying: “No—no.” She steadied herself by holding onto the book-shelves; and then, somehow, she got up-stairs. It was the sight of the soft gray dress, with its pretty laces, that stung her awake. That dress—was it hers? Was she to put it on? Was she to go and sit at the head of that shining table down in the dining-room?

“But, you know, I—*can’t*,” she said aloud, her voice hoarse and falling.

But she did.

By the time Fleming and his counsel came tramping up from the gate, at a quarter-past

MANY WATERS

seven, and stopped, hilariously, to kick the snow off their boots before entering the hall, Amy Fleming had arisen to meet the summons of life. She called Jane to fasten her dress, and when the woman, startled and shocked at the shrunken face, cried out:

“Oh, good land! what’s wrong wi’ ye, Mrs. Fleming?” she was able to say, quietly:

“Jane, when Mr. Fleming comes in, tell him I’ve had to go down to the kitchen to see about some things. And say I put his dress-suit out on the sofa in my room. Tell him the studs are in his shirt.”

Jane, silenced, went back to the kitchen. “Say, Mary Ann,” she said, “look a-here; there’s something the matter up-stairs.” The presence of the accommodating waitress checked further confidences; but, indeed, when Amy Fleming, ghastly, in her pretty dinner-dress, sought refuge in the kitchen (the one spot where her husband would not be apt to pursue her), and stood listening to the voices of the two men going up-stairs, Mary Ann needed no information that there was “something the matter.”

“She looks like she was dead,” the frightened women told each other.

R. J.'S MOTHER

“Jane,” her mistress said, “I wish you would open a bottle of champagne—one of the pints, not one of the big bottles; and give—me—a glass.” Her voice was faint. Jane obeyed hurriedly, and as the cork popped one man upstairs called out gayly to the other: “Hullo! has it begun already?”

Amy drank the wine and handed the glass back to the anxious woman. “I was feeling faint, Jane. I am all right now, thank you. Oh, there’s the door-bell! I’ll go into the library.” And when the two rather early comers had taken off their wraps and made their way down-stairs again, they found their hostess smiling whitely at them from the hearth-rug.

“Oh, Amy *dear!*” the wife said, dismayed, “what is the matter?” And the husband protested in a friendly way that he was afraid Mrs. Fleming was tired out. “Of course it has been a wearing week for you, in spite of its triumph,” he said, delicately.

Then Thomas Fleming and his lawyer came down-stairs, and there was more handshaking and congratulations, and it was not until he looked at his wife at dinner that Fleming really saw her face; its haggard pallor struck him dumb in the midst of some gay story he was

MANY WATERS

telling to the pretty neighbor on his right. He had been dull, just at first, and his gayety was a little forced, but after his first glass of champagne he brightened up very much, and had begun to tell a funny story. "And so the automobilist," he was saying—and broke off, staring blankly at Amy. "I'm afraid my wife is not well," he said, anxiously. But the pretty neighbor reassured him.

"Oh, it's only the reaction, Mr. Fleming! Amy has been perfectly splendid; but now, naturally, she feels the reaction."

Somehow or other, with its gayety and good-fellowship, that dreadful evening passed. When the friendly folk streamed out into the starry winter night, there was some anxious comment.

"How badly she looked!"

"My dear, can you wonder? Think what she's been through!"

But one woman, on her husband's arm, murmured a question: "You don't suppose he *could* have—done anything?"

"Twelve good men and true have said he didn't; your remark is out of order."

"But tell me, honestly, do you suppose it is possible that—that—?"

"I don't know anything about it, Helen. I

R. J.'S MOTHER

would bank on Tom Fleming as soon as on any man I know. But I don't know any man (myself included) who is not human. So, if you ask about 'possibilities'—but no! honestly, as you say, I'm sure Fleming is all right. And his wife is a noble woman. I've always admired Mrs. Fleming."

"She is the best woman in the world!" Amy's friend said, warmly. But in her own heart she was thinking that, if it came to possibilities, she knew *one* man to whom wrongdoing was impossible! And, happily, she squeezed his arm and brushed her cold, rosy cheek against his shoulder.

IV

WHEN Fleming closed the door upon the last lingering guest, he turned anxiously to his wife. "Amy, I haven't had a chance to speak to you. You are worn out. Bates, look at her—she's worn out!"

Bates, lounging in the library doorway, agreed. "Indeed she is. Mrs. Fleming, you ought not to have attempted a dinner-party. I believe it's all my fault, because I suggested it."

"It's your fault, because you got me off,"

MANY WATERS

Fleming said, jocosely. The dulness of the first part of the evening had quite disappeared; he was rather flushed and inclined to laugh buoyantly at everything; but his face was anxious when he looked at his wife. "Amy, you must go right straight to bed."

"I am going now," she said, pulling and straightening the fingers of her long gloves. "Good-night, Mr. Bates. I—will copy that poem for you—sometime," she ended, faintly.

Her husband put his arm about her to help her up-stairs, but she drew away. "No; stay and smoke with Mr. Bates." Then, as he insisted on going up with her, she stopped on the first landing and pushed his arm away sharply. "Please—*don't!* My head aches. Please—go away."

Thomas Fleming, dumfounded, could not find his wits for a reply before she had slipped away from him, and he heard the door of their bedroom close behind her. He stood blankly upon the stairs for a moment, and then went back to Bates.

"I never knew Amy so upset," he said, stupidly. And, indeed, there are few things more bewildering than sudden irrational irritation in a sweet and reasonable soul.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"It's been a hard week for her," Bates explained, easily. But Fleming smoked morosely; he was plainly relieved when his guest said he thought he would go to bed. He suggested, in a perfunctory way, a last visit to the dining-room for a drink of whiskey, and, when this was declined, arose with alacrity to conduct the sleepy lawyer to the spare-room door.

"We'll take the eight-thirty in the morning, Bates," he said; and Bates, yawning, agreed.

Fleming went softly into his own room, and was half disappointed, half relieved, to find his wife lying motionless, with closed eyes. "A good night's sleep will set her up," he thought, tenderly. For himself, he stopped in the process of pulling off his boots, and, shutting his lips hard together, stared at the floor. After a while he drew a long breath: "Well, thank the Eternal Powers," he said, and pulled off his boots softly—Amy must have a good night's sleep. Fleming himself had a good night's sleep. That Amy's eyes opened painfully to the dark when all the house had sunk into silence, of course he did not know. She seemed to be sleeping soundly when he awoke the next morning; and again he crept about, not daring even to kiss her, lest she might be disturbed.

MANY WATERS

Just before he and Bates made a dash for the eight-thirty, he told Jane to ask Mrs. Fleming to call him up on the telephone when she came down-stairs, so he might know how she was.

As for Amy, when she heard the front door close behind the two hurrying men, she got up and sat wearily on the side of the bed.

"Now I've got time to think," she said. There was a certain relief in the consciousness of silence and of time. She could think all day; she could think until he came home, at half-past six. How many hours? Ten! Ten hours in which to take up a new life. Ten hours in which to become acquainted with her husband.

"I have never known him," she said, feebly, to herself. . . . No doubt he had loved her; she was not questioning that. She was dully indifferent to the whole matter of love. The question was, What was she going to do? Yes; now she must think: After restitution was made, what would she do? How were they to go on living? Mere restitution (which must be made on Monday. No, Monday was a holiday; they would have to wait until Tuesday. Oh, how could she bear the delay? Well, on Tuesday, then, the money would be given to Mr. Hammond); but mere restitution would

R. J.'S MOTHER

not change the fact of what he was. She dropped back against her pillows, hiding her face. "*I never knew him.*"

Oh, this would not do! She must think.

Poor soul! She had no thoughts but that one: She and her husband were strangers. Over and over the words repeated themselves, until her very mind was sore. But she did her best, and the habit of common-sense was a great help. She had some coffee, and dressed and went down to the library—recoiling, involuntarily, at the sight of that corner where the books were still in some slight disorder. She even called Jane and bade her bring her duster. When the dusting was done, she told the woman that she would not see any one all day. "I have a headache," she explained; "don't let any one in." And when Jane left her she drew her little chair up to the hearth. "Now I'll think," she said. But her eye caught the flash of sunlight on a crystal ball on the mantel-piece, and it seemed as if her mind broke into a glimmering kaleidoscope: those partridges had been a little overcooked last night; . . . the gilt on the narrow, old-fashioned mirror over the mantel was tarnishing; . . . the \$3000 had been "borrowed" from one trust

MANY WATERS

to pay another. . . . Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. . . . How clear the crystal was. . . . Two thefts. . . . Jane must dust those shelves better. . . . Then she started with dismay—she was not thinking! Well: restitution, first of all—on Tuesday. They would sell a bond and take some money out of the bank. But after restitution they must go on living. She must try to understand him, to help him to be good, to be patient with him. “But I don’t know him,” came over and over the dreadful refrain, checked by the instant determination, “Oh, I *must* think!”

So the day passed. She told Jane to telephone her husband that she was up and feeling better; and he sent back some anxious message—she must rest, she must not overdo. He could not, unfortunately, come out on an early train, as he had hoped to do, being detained by some business matters; he would have to dine in town, but he would come out on the eight-thirty. She grasped at the delay with passionate relief—two hours more to think. Then it came over her that she was glad not to see him. How extraordinary not to be glad to see Tom! What did it mean? She wondered, vaguely, if she had stopped loving him? Not that it

R. J.'S MOTHER

made any difference whether she loved him or not. Love had no meaning to her. "Perhaps this is the way people who are dead feel about us," she thought. Then she wondered if she hated him, this stranger, whom she "did not know," this—thief? No, she did not hate him, either. But when respect, upon which love is built, is wrenched away, what happens? There is no love, of course. She thought, vaguely, that she had pitied Mrs. Hammond. And yet she herself did not care, apparently. How strange not to care! Pulling her wedding-ring off, slipping it on, pulling it off again, she said to herself, numbly, that she did not understand why she did not care. However, she could not go into this question of love or hate. Neither mattered. She beat her poor mind back to its task of "thinking."

The long, sunny winter afternoon faded into the dusk; a gleam of sunset broke yellow across the pleasant room, and, catching with a glimmering flash on the crystal, melted into a bloom of gray, with the fire, like the spark of an opal, shifting and winking on the hearth.

When Fleming came hurriedly up the garden path to his own door, he had to pull out his

MANY WATERS

latch-key to let himself into the house. This slight happening made him frown; so she was not well enough to come down? He took off his coat and started immediately up-stairs, then caught sight of her in the library, standing motionless, her back to the door, one hand resting on the mantel-piece, the other drooping at her side the fingers between the pages of a book. He came in quickly, with a gayly derisive laugh.

"You didn't hear me!" Then, as she did not turn, he sobered. "Amy, what is it? Why, Amy! Is there anything the matter? Is anything wrong?" His face was keenly disturbed, and he put his hand on her shoulder to make her look at him; but she lifted it away, gently, still keeping her eyes fastened on the fire.

"Yes. There is something—wrong."

"Amy!" he said, now thoroughly alarmed, "what is the matter? Tell me."

"I will tell you. Sit down. There: at the library table. I will—show you."

He sat down, blankly, his lower-lip falling open with perplexity. She sighed once, and brushed her hand over her eyes; then came quietly away from the hearth, and, going around the table, stood behind him and laid

R. J.'S MOTHER

the book down beside him. She pressed it open, and in silence ran her finger down the page.

V

THE fire sputtered a little; then everything was still. She had left him, and had gone back to the hearth-rug, and stood as before, one hand on the mantel-piece, the other, listless, at her side. The silence was dreadful.

Then, suddenly, Thomas Fleming ripped and tore the pages out of the book, and threw them on the logs; the quick leap of the flames shone on his white face and his furious eyes. A minute afterwards he spoke. . . . Under that storm of outrageous words she bent and shrank a little, silently. Once she looked at him with a sort of curiosity. So this was her husband? Then she looked at the fire.

When, choking with anger, he paused, she said, briefly, that she had been hunting for her Commonplace Book, down on that lower shelf, and had found—this.

“What the devil were my diaries doing on your lower shelf? One of those damned women of yours poking—”

“When we moved they were put there. They

MANY WATERS

had been in your old desk in the other house. They were locked up there. I suppose you forgot to lock them up here," she ended, simply. . . .

That next hour left its permanent mark on those two faces; agony and shame were cut into the wincing flesh, as by some inexorable die. At first Fleming was all rage; then rage turned into sullenness, and sullenness to explanation and excuse. But as he calmed down, shame, an old, old shame, that he had loathed and lived with for a dozen years, a shame that, except when Amy was too tenderly proud of him, he was sometimes able for days, or even weeks, to forget—this old shame reared its deadly head and looked out of his abased and shifting eyes. Yet he had his glib excuses and explanations. Amy, in the midst of them, sat down in her little low chair by the fire. She did not speak. She had her handkerchief in her hand, and kept pulling it out on her knee; smoothing it; then folding it; and a minute later, spreading it out again. At last, after a labored statement—how he had only borrowed it; how it had been at a time when he had been horribly pressed; how he had always meant to return it, of course; how, in fact, he had returned it by giving an

R. J.'S MOTHER

enormous amount of work for which he had never had any credit, or any money, either! how, as she knew, he had never been in a position to pay it back in actual cash—after this miserable and futile explanation had been repeated and repeated, he stopped to get his breath; and then, still pulling the hem of her handkerchief straight on her knee, his wife said, in a lifeless voice:

“Need we talk about it any more? On Tuesday we will send it back. (Monday is a holiday. You can't send it until Tuesday.) Then we will never talk about it any more.”

“Send what back?”

“The money. To Mr. Hammond.”

“Are you out of your senses!”

She looked up, confusedly. “You can't send it until Tuesday,” she repeated, mechanically.

He brought his fist down violently on the table. “I will never send it back! You are insane! Why, it would be acknowledging—”

“It would be confession,” she agreed.

“Well! that would be ruin.”

“Ruin?”

“Why, if people knew—” he began.

“It is ruin, anyhow,” she said, dully. “Don't you see? The only thing left is restitution.”

“I can't make what you call 'restitution'”

MANY WATERS

without ruin—absolute ruin! Do you realize what it would mean to me, in this town, to have it known that I—borrowed from the trust and—and had not yet returned it? On the stand, of course, I had to protect myself; and that would be—against me. And it *would* be known. Hammond would never let it be settled privately! He couldn't prosecute me on the old charge; but I suppose he might make a claim of—of perjury. Anyhow, just the publicity would ruin me. And he would make it public. Trust Hammond! Besides, I've given it back ten times over in unpaid-for work to the estate—" He stopped abruptly. Amy had fainted. . . .

Sunday was a long day of struggle. The immediate horror of violence was over; he was ashamed, and he loved her, and he was frightened. But he was immovable. His hardness was worse than his violence.

"I cannot do it, Amy; I will not do it. The thing is done. It's over. It's settled. I'm sorry; I—regret it; nobody regrets it as much as I do. But I will not destroy myself, and destroy you—you, too!—by returning it." Then, sullenly: "Anyway, I don't owe it, morally. I've more than made it up to them."

R. J.'S MOTHER

Monday, the holiday (and holidays had always been such joy to them—a whole day at home together!)—Monday, they struggled to the death.

It was in the afternoon that she suddenly flagged. She had been kneeling beside him, entreating him; and he had been hard and violent and childish by turns; but he would not. And towards dusk there came a dreadful pause. Partly, no doubt, it was because she was exhausted; but it was more than that. It was a sudden blasting consciousness that the man must save or lose his own soul. If she forced him to make restitution, the restitution would not be his, but hers. If she pushed him into honesty, he would still be dishonest. If he preferred the mire, he would be filthy if plucked out against his will and set on clean ground. A prisoner in heaven, is in hell! No, he must save himself. She could not save him.

She drew away and looked at him; then she covered her face with her hands. "I am done," she said, faintly.

The suddenness of her capitulation left him open-mouthed. But before he could speak she went away and left him. He heard her slip the bolt of their bedroom door; and then he heard her step overhead. After that, all was still.

MANY WATERS

The afternoon was very long; once he went out, and walked drearily about the snowy lanes, avoiding passers-by as well as he could. But for the most part he sat in the library and tried to read or smoke; but he forgot to turn over the pages, and he had to keep reaching for a match to relight his cigar. He said to himself that his life was over. Amy would leave him, of course; she had said as much. Well, he couldn't help it. Better the misery of a broken home than public shame and disgrace and ruin. And he *had* made 'restitution,' as she called it; he had made it many times over!

It was late at night, as he was saying something like this to himself for the hundredth time, that his wife came back into the room. She stood up in the old place on the hearth-rug. Very gently she told him what she had to say. She did not look at him; her eyes were fixed on the Japanese crystal resting in its jade bowl on the mantel-piece; once she took it up, and turned it over and over in the palm of her hand, looking at it intently as she spoke. But probably she did not know that she saw it.

"I have thought it all out," she began in a low voice; "and I see I was wrong—" He

R. J.'S MOTHER

started. "I was wrong. You must save your own soul. I can't do it for you. Oh, I would! but I can't. I shall not ever again insist. Yes, the Kingdom of God must be within you. I never understood that before."

"Amy," he began, but she checked him.

"Please!—I am not through yet. I shall pay the money back, somehow, sometime. (Oh, wait—wait; *don't* interrupt me!) Of course, I shall not betray you. My paying it shall not tell the truth, because, unless the truth is from you, it cannot help you. It must be your truth, not mine. But I shall save and save and save, and pay it back—to clear my own soul. For I—I have lived on that \$3000 too," she said with a sick look. She put the crystal back into its bowl. "It will take—a long time," she said, faintly.

She stopped, trembling from the effort of so many calm words. Thomas Fleming, looking doggedly at the floor, said: "I suppose you'll get a separation?"

"Get a separation?" she glanced at him for an instant. "Why, we are separated," she said. "We can't be any more separated than we are. I suppose we have never been together. But I won't leave you, if that is what you mean."

MANY WATERS

"You'll stay with me?" he burst out. "I thought you despised me!"

"Why, no," she said, slowly: "I don't think I despise you. I don't *think* I do. But of course—" She looked away, helplessly. "Of course, I have no respect for you."

"Well," he said, "I'm sorry. But there's nothing I can do about it."

Amy turned, listlessly, as if to go up-stairs again; but he caught at her dress.

"You really mean you won't—leave me?"

"No, I won't leave you."

"Of course," he said, roughly, "you don't love me; but—" His voice faltered into a sort of question.

She turned sharply from him, hiding her face in her arm and moving blindly, with one hand stretched out to feel her way, towards the door. "Oh," she said, "oh—I'm afraid—I—"

And at that he broke. . . . Poor, weak love, poor love that would have denied itself, but could not—love brought him to his knees, his arms around her waist, his head against her breast, his tears on her hand.

"Amy! *I will do it. I will give it back.* Oh, Amy, Amy—"

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

I

THE Reverend Silas Eaton was dead.

It was May, and the little orchard behind the parsonage was like a white and perfumed cloak flung on the shoulder of a bare hill-side which was, all the rest of it, rocky pasture. On sunny slopes, and in the shelter of the stone walls, the grass was vividly green. The apple blossoms were just beginning to fall; in any breath of wind single petals, white, stained outside with crimson, came down in flurries, like gusts of warm and aromatic snow. There was a stir of life everywhere. In the parsonage garden crown imperials had pushed their strong stalks through the damp earth, and peonies were reaching up long, slender arms, each with its red, curled fist of leaves, reluctant to expand until certain of the sun. The ground was spongy beneath the foot, and there were small

R. J.'S MOTHER

springs bubbling up under every winter-bleached tuft of last year's grass. The air, full of the scent of earth and growing things, was warm and sweet, yet with an edge of cold—the sword of frost in a velvet scabbard.

Life—life: and in the upper chamber of the parsonage the master lay dead.

One of the children had put a bunch of apple blossoms on the table at the head of the bed. They were not appropriate—the soft, rosy flowers beside the hard face there on the pillow; the face with its thatch of gray hair over the narrow, dome-like brow, seamed and cut with wrinkles; the anxious, melancholy lips set in such icy and eternal indifference—the face of the religious egotist, stamped with inexorable sincerity, stern and cold and mean. Not a father's face. But his daughter had put her handful of snowy flowers on the pine table, their little, gnarled, black stems thrust tightly down into a tumbler of water. And then she went tiptoeing out of the silent room. She heard her mother's little, light voice down-stairs in the parlor, and Elder Barnes's low, respectful murmur in response. They were "making the arrangements." Esther's heart stood still, not with grief, but with misery at the strangeness

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

of it all—her silent, meek, obedient mother saying what should or what should not happen to—father!

“And, Mr. Barnes, if it will not be a trouble, will you find out for me how much it would cost to send a telegram to my brother in Mercer?”

Esther, leaning over the balusters in the upper hall, opened her lips with astonishment. A telegram! It gave the child a sense of the dreadful importance of this May day as nothing else had done. The thought of the expense of it came next, sobering that curious sense of elation which is part of bereavement.

“Mother oughtn’t to do that. It will cost—oh, it will cost at least a dollar!”

This fifteen-year-old Esther had a certain grim practicality, born of a childhood in a minister’s family on five hundred dollars a year. A dollar! And that uncle in Mercer, whom she had never seen, who had quarrelled with her mother because she married her father, and who was so rich and powerful (according to a newspaper paragraph she had once read)—this uncle, who had had no connection with them in all these years—what was the use of wasting a dollar in telegraphing him? She meant to say

R. J.'S MOTHER

so; and yet, when she went down-stairs, after Elder Barnes had gone, and found her little mother standing at the window, looking blankly out at the garden, there was something in the mild, faded face that kept the girl silent. She came up and put her strong young arms about her, and kissed her softly.

“Mother, won't you lie down?”

“No, dear; I am not tired. Mr. Barnes has been very kind in telling me what must be done. I do hope everything will be as—*he* would wish.”

They did not speak for a little while, and then Esther said, in a low voice: “Mother, I don't want to worry you, and—and perhaps it's very soon to speak of it, but have you thought at all of what is going to become of us?”

Her mother put up her hand with a sort of shiver. “No, no; not yet. We mustn't talk of that yet. Oh, Esther, he is dead! Poor Silas—poor Silas!” She caught her breath like a child, and looked up at her tall daughter in a frightened way.

Esther nodded, and cried a little; then she wiped her eyes, and said, hesitating: “You're going to get a crape veil, aren't you, mother, and a black dress? And I think I ought to have a black dress.”

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

"We haven't any money for new clothes, Essie," Mrs. Eaton answered, tremulously.

"But I think we ought to wear black," Esther protested. "It isn't proper not to."

The other sighed with anxiety. "I don't see how we can. He would not wish us to waste the money."

They were very intimate, these two; for each had found the other a shelter from the fierce integrity which had ruled the family life. And now instinctively they nestled together, panting and chirping like two frightened birds, and saying to each other: "*He* would wish this, or that."

But he was dead, and the face of life was suddenly changed to them both. The withdrawal of the dominant righteous will of husband and father made an abrupt silence in their lives—a silence which was as overwhelming in its way as grief. To the mother it was as though having been borne helplessly along on some powerful arm, she had been suddenly set down on her own feet, and bidden to lead and carry others. Esther's frightened question, "What is going to become of us?" echoed in her ears like a crash of bewildering sound. She had no answer; all she knew was that she must take

R. J.'S MOTHER

care of the children: work for them; fight for them—poor, little, weak creature!—if necessary. She was thirty-five, this mother, but she looked much older. Once she must have been pretty; one knew that by the startled softness of her hazel eyes and the delicately cut pale lips; but her forehead, rounded like a child's, was worn and full of lines, and her whole expression so timid and anxious and deprecating that one only thought of what her life must have been to cut so deep a stamp on such gentle and vague material. It had been, since her marriage, a very uneventful life, its keenest excitement the making both ends meet on her husband's salary. Before that there had, indeed, been the exciting experience of marrying in opposition to her father's command, and being practically disowned by her people. She was Lydia Blair, a girl of good family, gentle and dutiful, as girls were expected to be thirty years ago—one of those pleasant girls who let their elders and betters think for them, and are loved as one loves comfortable and inanimate things. And then, suddenly, had appeared this harsh, fiery, narrow New England minister, of another denomination, of another temperament—for that matter, of another class; and she had

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

developed a will of her own and married him. Why? Everybody who knew her asked, "Why?" Perhaps afterwards she herself asked why—afterwards, when he became so intent upon saving his own soul that he had no time to win his children's love or to make love to his wife. By the time he came to die, very likely he had forgotten he ever had made love to her. He called her "Mrs. Eaton," and he was as used to her as he was to his battered old desk or his worn Bible. But when he came to die, he lay in his bed and watched her as he had not done these fifteen years; and once he said, when she brought him his medicine, "You've been a good wife, Mrs. Eaton"; and once, "You're very kind, Lily";—but that was at the end, and the doctor said his mind was wandering. And then the end had come, in the spring night, towards dawn; and now he was lying still, as indifferent to the soft weather, the shower of apple blossoms, the two children whispering about the house, the wife staring, dry-eyed, out into the sunshine—as indifferent as he always had been.

Well, well, he was a good man—a good Presbyterian, at any rate. And now he had gone to find the God whom he had defamed and vilified

R. J.'S MOTHER

under the name of religion, imputing to Him meanness and cruelty and revenge—the passions of his own poor human nature.

And may that God have mercy on his soul!

II

ROBERT BLAIR came into the dining-room holding the "dollar telegram" in his hand. His wife looked up at him, smiling.

"It is really shameful the way business pursues you! I am going to tell Samuel to burn all despatches that come here. Your office is the place for those horrid yellow papers."

"It isn't business this time, Nellie; it's death."

"Oh, Robert!"

"Oh," he hastened to explain, "it's nothing that touches us. My sister Lydia's husband is dead. You have heard me speak of my sister Lydia, haven't you? It was long before your day, you baby, that she married him. Ah, well, what a pretty girl she was!" He sat down, shook his head when the man offered him soup, and opened his napkin thoughtfully. "Well, he's dead. He was a most objectionable person—"

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

Mrs. Blair looked at the butler's back as he stood at the sideboard, and raised her eyebrows; but her husband went on, the frown deepening on his forehead:

"My father forbade it—did I never tell you about it?—but Lydia, who had always been a nonentity, suddenly acquired a will and married him. My father never forgave her. She didn't care for any affection that didn't include her parson, so she cut herself off from all of us. Of course, I'm sorry for her now; but I don't feel that I have anything to reproach myself with." He tapped the table with impatient fingers, and told the butler that he didn't want his claret *boiled!* "Haven't you any sense, Samuel? You're a perfect fool about wine; here, throw that out of the window, and get me a fresh bottle!"

Mrs. Blair was a beautiful young woman, who, two years before, had married this irascible, successful, dogmatic man, and (so Mercer said) could wind him round any one of her pretty, jewelled fingers whenever she wanted to. He certainly was very much in love—and so was she, though her particular world never believed it, alleging that she was not indifferent to the loaves and fishes.

R. J.'S MOTHER

But the fact was Mrs. Blair took the loaves and fishes with a child-like delight which meant appreciation, certainly, but not avarice. She enjoyed her wealth, and her life, and herself, immensely and openly; and that was her charm to her husband, a man immersed in large affairs, sagacious, powerful, and without imagination. He was a cultivated man, because his forebears had been educated people, of sober, comfortable wealth; hence he had gone to college, like other young men of his class, and had travelled, and had acquired an intellectual, or rather a commercial, knowledge of Art. But, until he married, every instinct was for power, and the making of money. After that, though the guiding principle remained the same, a sense of beauty did awaken in him. He never flagged in his fierce and joyous and cruel passion for getting; but he delighted in his wife—perhaps as one of his own enormous machines might have delighted in a ray of sunlight dancing across its steel shafts and flickering through the thunderous whirl of its driving-wheel. He loaded the girl he married with every luxury; almost immediately she found she had nothing left to desire—from dogs to diamonds, houses, yachts, or pictures. She, poor child, realized no depriva-

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

tion in seeing every wish fulfilled, and thought herself the luckiest and the happiest woman in the world. Her money, combined with a good deal of common-sense, gave her the power to interfere helpfully in the lives of less fortunate people. She called it Philanthropy, and found playing Providence to the halt, the maimed, and the blind a really keen interest. Her impulse was always to "manage"; and so, when her husband, frowning, and perhaps a little less satisfied with himself than usual, began to talk about his sister's affairs, Mrs. Blair was instantly interested.

"Of course her husband's death will make a difference in her income?" she said, as they went up-stairs to the library. "A country minister's salary doesn't amount to much, anyhow; but—"

"Well, she made her bed," he interrupted, sharply; "she ought to be willing to lie on it!"

"Oh yes, of course; but now the man is dead, it's different. I know you want to do something for her, you are so generous."

He pulled her pretty ear at that, and told her she was a flattering little humbug. "What do you want, diplomat? You'll bankrupt me yet. Am I to build a palace for Lily? Look

R. J.'S MOTHER

here, I wrote that West Virginia college president to-day and told him I'd give him the money he wanted. It's all your doing, but I get the name of a great educator."

"Oh, Robert, how good you are! I think that ought to silence the people that say you 'grind the face of the poor.' I saw that in the paper to-day. Beasts! and you are so generous! I tell you what I want: I want you to have them come here, your sister and the children—"

"You angel!" he said. "No; that's dangerous. We mightn't like the brats. The boy's name is Silas. I don't think I could stand a cub named Silas. But the girl wouldn't be so bad. As for Lily (we used to call her Lily when she was a girl), she is one of those gentle, colorless women, all virtue and no opinions, whom anybody could live with. Rather a fool, you know. But we'll have them come and make us a visit, if it won't bore you. That's the safe thing to do. If we like it, we can prolong it. If we don't like it, nobody's feelings are hurt when it's time to say good-bye. But, of course, I'll see that poor Lil has a decent income. My father didn't leave her a cent. The old gentleman said he wouldn't have 'that hell-fire Pres-

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

byterian use any of his money for his damned heathen!' But I'll look after her now."

Thus it was that a home was prepared for Silas Eaton's widow; the offer of it came the day after the funeral, when she sat down to face the future. She had gone over her assets, in her halting, feminine way, counting up the dollars on her fingers, and subtracting the debts with a stubby lead-pencil on the back of an old envelope; and she had discovered that when all the expenses of the funeral were paid she would have in the bank one hundred and seventy-five dollars. If she could manage to sell her husband's very limited library, she might add a few dollars to that sum; but very few.

One hundred and seventy-five dollars! She must go to some city and find work, so that Silas and Esther might be educated. She had got as far as that when her brother's letter came. He would have come himself, he said, but he was detained by an annoying strike in one of his rolling-mills, and so wrote to ask her to come, with the children, and visit him for a little while; "then we'll see what can be done; but don't worry about ways and means. I will see

R. J.'S MOTHER

to all that; I know of a nice little house I can get for you, out on the River Road."

She read the straightforward, kindly words, her heart beating so she could scarcely breathe. Then she covered her face with her hands, and trembled with excitement and relief. "Oh," she said, "the children won't be poor! Robert will take care of us."

III

WHEN Mrs. Eaton went to Mercer, the change in her life was absolute and bewildering. Robert Blair's enormous wealth was, at first, simply not to be realized. The subdued and refined magnificence of the house conveyed nothing to his sister's mind, because she had no standard of value. The pictures and tapestries implied not money, but only beauty and joy; as she had never dreamed of buying anything but food and clothes, how could she guess that all the money of all her sixteen years on a minister's salary would not have purchased, say, the small, misty square of canvas that held in one corner a wonderful and noble and peasant name?

The first night in the great wainscoted dining-room, with a man bringing unknown dishes to

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

her elbow, with candles shining on elaborate and useless pieces of silver, with the glow of firelight flickering out from under a superb chimney-piece of Mexican marble, and dancing about the stately and dignified room—the beauty and the graciousness and the wonder of it was an overwhelming experience, though she had not the dimmest idea of the fortune it represented—a fortune notorious and envied the land over. That she had had no share in it until now did not wound her in the least; she was grateful for the warmth and the comfort and the kindness, now they had come; she never harked back to the painful years of silence and forgetfulness.

Her brother and his wife watched her, amused and interested; her dazzled admiration of everything was half touching, half droll. But what a confession it was! Eleanor Blair realized this, and she said to herself, warmly, that she would make up to Robert's sister for the past. She was in her element in arranging her sister-in-law's future; she made a dozen plans for her in the first week; but her husband laughed and shook his head.

"Wait," he said; "time enough when we see how we get along."

R. J.'S MOTHER

But they got along very well. The children, after the first shy awkwardness had worn off, were really attractive. Silas, an eager, brown-eyed boy of eleven, lovable in spite of his name, made artless and pretty love to his pretty aunt, who found him a delightful plaything. "The serious Esther," as her uncle called her, was a friendly little creature, when one came to know her; her common-sense commended her to Mr. Blair, and her dressmaking and her education were immediate interests to her aunt.

So it came about that the visit was prolonged, and the project of a little establishment of her own for Mrs. Eaton gradually given up—at all events, for the present. It was very satisfactory as it was. The house was so big, they were not in the way; and Mrs. Eaton's mourning kept her in the background in regard to society—which "was just as well," Mrs. Blair admitted, smiling to herself—but it made no difference in her usefulness. And she was really quite useful in one way or another; she could write an intelligent note to a tradesman, or reply (by formula) to a begging letter; so, by-and-by, she was practically her sister-in-law's secretary, and certainly the Blairs had never had either a maid or a butler who could begin to arrange flowers for a

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

dinner-party as Mrs. Eaton did. She was silent, and rather vague, but always gentle, and ready and eager to fetch and carry for anybody. She so rarely expressed any opinion of her own, that when she did the two strong and good-natured people who made her life so easy for her could hardly take it seriously. She did, to be sure, have an opinion in regard to changing her son's objectionable name, which Eleanor Blair thought would be a good thing to do. "It isn't pretty," she agreed, "but it is his name, so it cannot be changed." And once she refused to let Mrs. Blair send Esther to dancing-school. "But you don't think dancing is wrong, do you?" her sister-in-law protested. "Oh no," Mrs. Eaton said, nervously; "but her father did, so I'd rather not."

Robert Blair laughed when this absurd stubbornness was quoted to him, and said he would straighten it out. But somehow it was not straightened out. Esther teased, and Mrs. Blair was just a little impatient and sarcastic. But Esther did not go to dancing-school.

"I'm sorry to displease you, Eleanor," Mrs. Eaton said, shrinking as she spoke, like a frightened animal which expects a blow, "but—I can't allow it. Mr. Eaton would not have wished it."

R. J.'S MOTHER

Except for one or two such happenings, she was perfectly negative; yet, negative as she seemed, she was keenly alive to the advantages of this full, rich life for the children, and, indeed, for herself. Mere rest was such a luxury to her, for she had lived and worked as only a country minister's wife must. So, to feel no anxiety, to have delicate food, to know the touch of fine linen—in fact, to be comfortable—meant more to her than even her brother enjoying his generosity towards her, could possibly imagine.

So life began for his sister and her children in Robert Blair's beautiful, great house in the new part of Mercer—the new part which is not offended by the sight of those great, black chimneys roaring with sapphire and saffron flames, or belching monstrous coils of black smoke all spangled with showers of sparks. Those chimneys are not beautiful to look upon, but they have made the "new" part of Mercer possible. When Mrs. Eaton came to her brother's house, these unlovely foundations of his fortune were still for a month. There was a strike on, and Mercer was cleaner and quieter than it had been for many months—in fact, than it had been since the last strike. The clang and clamor of the machine-shops, the scream of the steel

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

saws biting into the living, glowing rails, the thunderous crash of plates being tested in the hot gloom of the foundries had all stopped.

"And oh, dear me," said Mrs. Blair, "what a relief it is! Of course it's very annoying to have them strike, and all that, but when one drives into town to get to the other side of the river, the noise is perfectly intolerable. And when the wind is in that direction we can really hear the roar even out here."

She said this to her clergyman, who looked at her with a veiled sparkle of humor in his handsome eyes.

"So the puddlers shall starve to make a Mercer holiday," he said, good-naturedly.

"If they choose to strike, they must take the consequences," she replied, with some spirit. "Besides, they are the most ungrateful creatures! Well, I'm sure I don't know what we're coming to!"

"Something may be coming to us," her visitor said, with a whimsical look; but he sighed, and got up to take his leave. His charming parishioner sighed, too, prettily, and said, with much feeling:

"Of course, Mr. West, if there are any cases that need help, you'll let me know,"

R. J.'S MOTHER

"But, Nellie," said Mrs. Eaton, who had been sitting silent, as usual, and quite overlooked by the other two, "is there any use in helping the people who are in trouble because they are out of work, and yet not letting them go to work?"

Mrs. Blair laughed, in spite of herself, the protest was so unexpected and so absurd coming from this meek source. "My dear," she said, "you don't understand; they can go to work if they want to."

"Well," Mrs. Eaton said, anxiously, "I should think, either they are wrong, and so you should not help them, or they are right, and they ought to get what they want."

Her sister stared at her, and then laughed again, greatly amused; but William West put on his glasses and gave her a keen look.

"Mrs. Eaton, don't you want to help us on the Organized Relief Association?"

"Yes, sir," said Lydia Eaton, "if there's anything I can do."

"I don't want to steal your services away from any other parson," he said, pleasantly. "I suppose you belong to Mr. Hudson's flock? You are a Presbyterian, of course?"

"No, sir, I am not," she said, the color rising in her face.

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

"Oh, then you do belong to me?" he said, smiling.

"I'm not an Episcopalian," she answered, with a frightened look.

"Then what on earth are you?" Mrs. Blair asked her, laughing.

"I'm not—anything," she said, her voice trembling; "but, Eleanor, please don't speak of it. The children must not know it. Mr. Eaton would want them to be members of his Church. So we must always go there.

There was an instant's awkward pause. Mrs. Blair looked very disapproving.

"Why, Lydia," she said, "do you mean you don't believe things? Why, I never had a doubt in my life!" she exclaimed, turning to the minister, who was silent.

Mrs. Eaton caught her breath, and looked at him, too, her mild eyes full of pain. "Nobody ever asked me before. I am sorry, but I cannot believe. The Bible says people go to hell; but God is good, so the Bible can't be true. But Mr. Eaton would wish me to go to church."

The perfectly simple logic, so primitive as to stop at "the Bible says," was irresistibly funny; yet, to William West, infinitely touching. But he put the discussion aside quietly.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"So you will come on our committee?" he said. "We shall be glad to have you."

But when he went away he laughed a little to himself. "The iron heel of Edwards, I suppose. But how direct! Two and two make four. She is incapable of understanding that they sometimes make five."

Mrs. Blair did not dismiss the matter so lightly. She was annoyed at the protest about the strikers, and that impelled her to straighten out Mrs. Eaton's theological beliefs. There was some irritation in her voice as she began, but she was in earnest, and stopped in the middle of "proofs" to tell Samuel to say she was "'not at home';—I don't want to be interrupted just now; I want to show you how wrong you are," she said to her sister-in-law, very seriously.

"But, Eleanor, you are at home," Mrs. Eaton protested, in a frightened way.

"My dear, that is a form of speech."

"But it makes Samuel tell a lie," she said, nervously.

"Oh, Lily, don't be silly," Mrs. Blair said, impatiently, and then jumped from hell to the strikers—though, as it happened, the distance between them was not so great, after all. "Really, now, Lydia, I don't think you ought

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

to speak as you did before Mr. West about the men. In the first place, business isn't philanthropy, and Robert can't give in to them. And in the second place, they are behaving outrageously! I should think you would have more loyalty to Robert than to seem to uphold them."

"I only meant—" Mrs. Eaton began, breathlessly.

"Oh, my dear, you don't know what you mean," Mrs. Blair interrupted, laughing and good-natured again. "But just remember, will you, how kind Robert is? It seems to me he is always doing things for this ungrateful place. Look at the fountain in the square; that's the last thing."

"But wouldn't the men rather have had running water in the tenements?" Mrs. Eaton said; "there are only hydrants down in the back yards."

However, as that first year in Mercer slipped by, there were very few such jars between the Blairs and their meek little visitor. The strike ended early in the fall, and there was nothing to call out any objectionable opinion from Mrs. Eaton on that line.

"As for Lydia," Robert Blair said, once, "you

R. J.'S MOTHER

say 'go,' and she goeth. She has absolutely no will of her own."

This was, apparently, quite true. At all events, she had a genius for obedience and a terror of responsibility. In the organized relief work which Mrs. Blair's clergyman had proposed, obedience necessitated responsibility sometimes, and no one knew how the silent little creature suffered when she had to decide anything. But she did decide, usually with remarkable but very simple common-sense.

"And always on the supposition that two and two make four," Mr. West said, to himself. He found her literalness a little aggravating just at first, but it was very diverting. He used to put on his glasses and watch her anxious face when she talked to him or received his orders (for such his requests or suggestions seemed to her); and he would ask her questions to draw out her astounding simplicity and directness of thought, and find her as refreshing as a child. She used to sit up before him, saying, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and looking, with her startled eyes, like a little gray rabbit—for at the end of a year she took off her black dress, and wore instead soft grays that were very pretty and becoming. Her absolute literalness gave him

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

much entertainment; but she never knew it. If she had guessed it, she would have been humbly glad to have been ridiculous, if it had amused him.

And so the first year and a half went by.

IV

It was the next winter that she asked her first question.

"Mr. West," she said, after making notes of this or that case that needed looking after (for she was practically visitor for St. James now)—
"Mr. West, I would like to ask you something."

"Do, my dear Mrs. Eaton," he answered, heartily.

"I would like to ask you," she said, her eyes fixed on his, to lose no shade of meaning in his reply, "do you think it would be right for one person to live on money that another person had stolen?"

"If they knew it was stolen, of course not!" he said, smiling. "Has a pickpocket offered to go halves with you?"

"No, sir," she answered, so gravely that her listener's eyes twinkled. She made no explanation, but went away with a troubled look.

R. J.'S MOTHER

The next time she saw him she had another question:

"But suppose the person who lived on the money the other person stole needed it very much. Suppose they hadn't anything else in the world. Suppose their children hadn't anything else. Would it be their business to ask where it came from, Mr. West?"

"If it was their business to spend it, it would be," he told her. "Oh, my dear lady, the question of complicity is a pretty big one!" He sighed, thinking how little she realized that she was guessing at the riddle of the painful earth.

Again she went away, her face falling into lines of care. But William West never thought of the matter again. Indeed, he had no time to think of his quiet almoner; those were alarming days in Mercer. The echoes of that storm which shook not only the town, but the very State and nation, are still rolling and muttering in the dark places of the land.

Another strike had begun in October. As for the deep and far-reaching causes, the economic and industrial necessities, the vast plans of organizations and trusts, they have no place in this statement of the way in which one ignorant woman regarded their effects—a woman living

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

quietly in her brother's house, doing her work, expending her little charities, trying to relieve the dreadful misery of those wintry days, with about as much success as a child who playing beside some terrific torrent tries to dam it with his tiny bank of twigs and pebbles. Robert Blair's sister had no economic or ethical theories; she had only an anguished heart at the suffering in that dreary mill town, a dreadful bewilderment at its contrast with the untouched luxury of her brother's house. That she should find a child in one of the tenements dying at its mother's barren breast, while her own children fared sumptuously every day; that a miserable man should curse her because her brother was robbing him of work and warmth and decency, even, while she must bless that same brother for what he was giving her, was a dreadful puzzle. As she understood the situation, this misery existed because her brother would no longer give even fourteen cents an hour to human beings who had to stand half naked in the scorch of intense furnaces, reeking with sweat, taking a breathless moment to plunge waist-deep into tanks of cold water; to men who worked where the crash of exploding slag or the accidental tipping of a

R. J.'S MOTHER

ladle might mean death; to gaunt and stunted creatures, hollow-eyed, with bleared and sodden faces, whose incessant toil to keep alive had crushed out the look of manhood, and left them silent, hopeless, brutish, with only one certainty in their stupefied souls: "*men don't grow old in the mills.*" . . . That these things should be, while she was clothed in soft raiment bought by wealth which these desperate beings had helped to create — meant to this ignorant woman that there was something wrong somewhere. It was not for her to say what or where. She had no ambition to reform the world. She did not protest against the "unearned increment," nor did she have views as to "buying labor in the cheapest market." She did not know anything about such phrases. The only thing that concerned her was whether she, living on her brother's money, had any part or lot in the suffering about her? She grew nervous and haggard and more distrait and literal than ever. She wished she dared lay her troubles before the wise, gentle, strong man who, to her, was all that was good and great. But it did not seem to her right to criticise her brother to his clergyman. She never realized how amusing her simplicity might be, laid up against the

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

enormous complexity of the industrial question; to her it was only, "If Robert is rich, and doesn't give his workmen enough to live on, are not the children and I stealing from the men in living on Robert's money?"

This little question, applied to the relations of capital and labor, is of course absurd; but she asked it all the same, this soft, negative, biddable creature. She had gone to take some food to a hungry household, and she came away burning with shame because she was not hungry! It had been a cold, bright November day; she went past one of the silent furnaces along the black cinder path to the river-bank, where the flattened cones of slag were dumped; some of them were still slightly warm.

It was quiet enough here to think: After all, Robert's money did so much good; there was the great fountain in the square, and the hospital, and the free night-school. And think of what he was doing for Essie and Silas! Oh, it surely wasn't her business to ask why he cut the men's wages down!

There was a flare of sunset flushing the calm blue of the upper heavens, and in the river, running black and silent before her, a red glow smouldered and brightened. Behind her, and

R. J.'S MOTHER

all along the opposite bank, the furnaces were still. Oh, the misery of that black stillness! If only she could see again the monstrous sheets of flame, orange and azure, bursting with a roar of sparks from under the dampers of the great chimneys! It would mean work and warmth and food to so many! By some unsuggested flash of memory the parsonage garden came swiftly to her mind. It must be lying chill in the wintry sunset; she could see the little house behind it, with its bare, clean poverty; she wished she were back in it again with the two children! The beauty and the luxury of her brother's house seemed suffocating and intolerable; and yet would it feed the strikers if she should starve?—the vision of her own destitution without her brother's money was appalling. She sat down on a piece of slag, a little faint at the thought. Just then, from down below her, on the great heap of refuse, she heard voices.

“Come farther up; they're hotter higher up,” a woman said, shrilly.

Then a miserable little group came clambering over the great cones of cooling slag, and a child cried out, joyously: “This here one's hot, mammy!”

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

The woman, catching sight of Robert Blair's sister, though not recognizing her, said, harshly:

"You bet hangman Blair has a fire in his house to-day. Well, thank God, he 'ain't made no cut in slag yet; we can get a bit of warmth here. I wish he may freeze in his bed!"

Lydia Eaton answered, stammering and incoherent, something about the cold weather; and then, she was so overstrained and nervous, she burst out crying. "Oh, won't you please let me give you this?" she said, and put some money into the woman's hand.

She went away, stumbling, because her eyes were blurred with tears, and saying to herself: "What *shall* I do?"

When she reached the street again, she almost ran into Mr. West before she saw him. When she did, she stopped abruptly, putting her hands on his arm, and, in her agitation, shaking it violently, her whole face convulsed and terrified.

"Tell me—you know; you are good: whose fault is it—for all—this? Robert's?"

He understood instantly, and was very gentle with her.

"My dear Mrs. Eaton, that is a very big question. It isn't any one man's fault. It seems

R. J.'S MOTHER

strange, but the weather in India may be the reason we are all so wretched in Mercer. Your brother may be forced to make this cut by great laws, which perhaps you cannot understand."

"But *we* go on being warm," she said; "I wouldn't say anything if we were all cold together. Oh, those little children had to get warm on the slag! Oh, sir, I don't believe the Saviour would have been warm while the children were cold!"

She looked at him passionately, abruptly applying the precepts of the Founder of his religion.

"Ah, well, you know," William West said, kindly, "this whole matter is so enormously complicated—" And then he stammered a little, for, after all, how could he explain to this poor, little, frightened, ignorant soul that we have learned how injurious to the race would be the literal application of the logic of the Sermon on the Mount? Nowadays the disciple is wiser than his master, and the servant more prudent than his Lord; we know that to feed the five thousand with loaves and fishes, without receiving some equivalent, would be to pauperize them. But of course Mrs. Eaton could not

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

be made to understand that. The clergyman quieted her, somehow; perhaps just by his gentle pitifulness; or else her reverence for him silenced her. She did not ask him any more questions; and there was no one else to ask, except her brother, and just now it would have been hard to find the chance to ask Robert Blair anything.

The strike had slowly involved all the mills owned by a syndicate of which he was chairman. He had to go to South Bend, where the great smelting-furnaces are; he was mobbed there, though with no worse results than the unpleasantness of eggs and cabbage stalks; still, the wickedness of those dreadful creatures was something too awful, Mrs. Blair said, crying with anger and fright over the newspaper account. At still another mill town a ghastly box reached him, labelled, "Starved by the Blair syndicate." Robert Blair paled and sickened at its contents, but he swore under his breath: "Let them starve their brats, if they want to; it isn't my business. There's work for them if they want it; but the curs would rather loaf. This country can go to the devil before I'll give in to them!"

He did not get back to Mercer until Decem-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ber. "I wouldn't let the fools keep me from you on Christmas," he told his wife, savagely, and caught her in his arms with a sort of rage. "Were you very lonely? You've been nervous—I can see it in your face. You are paler!" He ground his teeth; that those brutes should have made her paler!

"Of course I was lonely," she said, smiling, though her eyes were bright with tears, "and I've been frightened almost to death about you, too. Oh, that mob!"

"You little goose; didn't I tell you there was no danger? I always had two detectives. But I used to get anxious about you. I telegraphed the mayor to detail an officer to be always about the house. Heaven knows what's going to be the end of this business, Nell. Well, sweetheart, may I have some dinner, or must I go and dress first?"

"No. You're dreadfully dusty, but I can't lose sight of you for a moment," she said, gayly. "Robert, I should have died if you hadn't been at home for Christmas!"

His sister and the children met him at the dining-room door—Silas, capering about with delight; Esther, prettier than ever, coming to hang on his arm, and rub her cheek against his

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

shoulder, and say how glad she was to see him.

"Robert, it's perfectly disgusting," Mrs. Blair complained, "but a delegation insists upon seeing you to-night; they are coming about eight."

"Oh, confound it!" he said, frowning; "the strike, of course? A lot of parsons meddling with what they know nothing about."

"There are some parsons among them, I suppose," she said; "but the mayor is coming. Do get rid of them as soon as you can, so that I may have a little of you."

She looked so pretty as she sat at the head of her table, beseeching him, that he declared he would kick the delegation out if they stayed over ten minutes; then he tossed a small, white velvet box across the roses in the big silver bowl in the middle of the table, and watched her flash of joy as she opened it.

"It seems to me I have some more boxes somewhere," he said, good-humoredly. "There, Essie; if your aunt Eleanor had packed me off to get into my dress-suit, I wouldn't have found this one in my pocket. Lydia, you sober old lady, can you wear that? As for you, Silas, you don't want any gewgaws, do you? We

R. J.'S MOTHER

fellows think more of a bit of paper with three figures on it, hey?"

"There—there's the bell! It's your horrid delegation," Mrs. Blair cried. "Just let them wait till you finish dinner. And do get rid of them quickly. Mr. Hudson, Lydia's minister, will be there; tell him to wait a minute when the others have gone. I want to speak to him."

"I thought little Hudson had more sense," Robert Blair grumbled, rising and going into the library to meet a dozen of his fellow-citizens, some of them men with grave and startled faces, who from pity for the five thousand fools who were turning Mercer upside down, and from good-humored interest in the affairs of their powerful townsman, were beginning to feel the sting of personal alarm about their own concerns.

These men were saying to each other what the newspapers had been saying for two months, that Robert Blair, for vanity or obstinacy or greed, was bringing alarming disaster, not merely upon a few thousand desperate and hungry and unreasonable puddlers, but upon the respectable, well-to-do business population of his city.

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

“And he’s got to stop it!” the mayor said, angrily.

“It would be a good job if somebody would blow him up with dynamite,” said the Baptist deacon, who was the wealthiest merchant in town. “He’ll swamp us all if we don’t look out.”

As for the clergyman, he looked very miserable, for he had the expenses of his church and his own salary in mind, and between offending Mr. Blair and not protesting against the continuance of the strike, the poor little man was between the devil and the deep sea.

“Gentlemen,” said Robert Blair, calm and hard (“as nails,” the Baptist deacon said), “I appreciate the honor of your call, and I hope I have listened with proper courtesy and patience to what you had to say; but allow me to call your attention to certain facts which seem to contradict your assertions that I am not acting for the public good in this matter of the strike. Mr. Mayor, if my wealth had been gained by the subversion of law and order, as you suggest, I am sure you could not have accepted any of it for your campaign—ah—*expenses*. For you, Mr. Davis, a church-member, a deacon, if I mistake not, I need only remind you of your will-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ingness to borrow, I will not say how many thousands, as the basis of your most successful business (though I would not be thought to underrate your own prudence and economy in paying your women clerks a little less than they can live on). And as for my worthy friend here, the Reverend Mr. Hudson, if my money were, as he has so delicately implied, 'blood-money,' I cannot think he would have accepted the contribution I had the privilege of making towards the alterations of his church. Gentlemen, you have felt it your duty to remonstrate with me upon my way of making money; so long as you are content to spend that money, I cannot believe that your remonstrances are based upon anything else than the inconvenience to yourselves of certain exigencies which I deeply regret but which result from methods which commend themselves to me, and which, I observe, you apply in your own concerns: you all pay as little as you can for what you want; I pay as little as I can for labor. For your immediate request that I submit to the demands of the strikers, I can only say that when Mr. Davis will give away in charity the fortune built upon the outcome of those methods; when his honor the mayor will refund the—ah—*expenses* of his

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

recent successful campaign and call it conscience-money; when the Reverend Mr. Hudson will give up improving his church—in fact, when you all consent to buy your shirts or your potatoes in the dearest market, I will consent to do the same thing; I will alter the methods whereby I have had the honor of serving you, and I will pay more for labor than it is worth. Yes, gentlemen, we will all reform together. When you are ready for that, I will recognize a moral issue, as Mr. Hudson so admirably expresses it. Until then I will try to mind my own business. If it were not perhaps discourteous, I would recommend a like course of action to this committee. Gentlemen, I bid you good-evening.”

He was pale with rage. He forgot his wife's message to the minister; he bowed, and stood with folded arms watching the withdrawal of the humiliated and angry delegation, “with their tails between their legs,” the little clergyman said to himself, stung by the impudent injustice of it all.

Mr. Blair went into the drawing-room, breathing hard with the restraint he had put upon himself, for his coldly insolent words had been no outlet to his anger. “Don't talk about it,”

R. J.'S MOTHER

he said, violently. "I won't hear another word on the subject. Nell, I thought that little Hudson was not entirely a jackass, though he is a parson; he had the impertinence to say that 'Brother West' agreed with him. I don't believe it! But if it's true, why, then, West is a meddling idiot, like all the rest of these damned, self-seeking philanthropists."

"Robert, *dear!* the children," murmured Mrs. Blair, nervously.

His face was dully red, and his blue, fierce eyes cut like knives; one felt an unspoken epithet applied to the children, who watched him furtively, with frightened glances, and moved about awkwardly, speaking to each other in undertones. A moment before everything had been full of charm and graciousness; their pretty aunt sat, indolent and graceful, on a yellow sofa, leaning back against some ivory satin cushions, with a great, yellow-shaded lamp shining down on her delicate dark beauty; the flicker of the fire behind the sparkling brass dogs went leaping softly about the room, glowing on the walls, which were covered above the white wainscoting with yellow damask, on which the candle-light from the high sconces fell with a yellow shine; everything was golden

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

and bright and rich, and the warm, still air was delicate with the scent of violets. Then into it had burst this violent and angry presence.

Robert Blair tramped up and down, kicked a little gilded stool half across the room, caught his foot in a rug, stumbled, and then swore. Mrs. Blair's fox-terrier, Pat, shrunk under a table and looked at him, trembling. There is no embarrassment quite like the embarrassment of listening to a person for whom one has a regard making a fool of himself. Nobody spoke. Then Mrs. Eaton said in a low voice: "Silas, you and Esther must go up-stairs."

"The trouble is," her brother went on, with angry contempt, "these men don't know what they are talking about; they don't know anything about the market; they don't know anything about the necessities of trade; all they know is their dividends; if *they* were cut, there'd be a howl! But they presume to dictate to us; to tell us the money is 'blood-money'; all the same, they are ready enough to spend it on their own carcasses!"

Mrs. Eaton had closed the door on her children, and came and stood by a little silver-cluttered table, under the big yellow lamp. "I think Robert is quite right," she said.

R. J.'S MOTHER

The approval of this mild creature was like an edge laid against the tense thread of Robert Blair's anger. He burst into a laugh.

"Bless your heart, Lydia, I didn't know you were in the room. Well, my dear, I'm glad you approve of me."

"I don't, brother."

"Oh, you don't? Where are the chicks? Sent them out of the room because I used bad words? Well, I oughtn't to swear in the drawing-room, that's a fact. *Place aux Dames!* But, after all, I only dropped the '*place*.'"

"Oh!" his wife said; and then, "you are very naughty!" and pouted, and pulled him down on his knees beside her.

"I thought it was very natural to be angry at the rug," Mrs. Eaton said, breathlessly; "I've often felt like speaking that way myself—"

"Do, Lydia, do!" Mr. Blair interrupted, with a laugh.

"—but Mr. Eaton would never have allowed the children to hear, and—"

"Come, now! Haven't I apologized? Don't rub it in. I'll give you something extra to put in the plate on Sunday, because I did pitch into your man Hudson like the devil! I told

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

him so long as he spent my 'blood-money,' for his darned improvements, he couldn't reproach me for earning it."

"Oh," Lydia Eaton said, her hands squeezed together—"oh no! He is quite different from—me. It is *you* who are spending the—blood-money on the improvements. If he were spending it on himself, like—like me, it would be different."

Her brother looked up at her from his footstool at his wife's feet, first amused, and then bored.

"My dear Lily, I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about. I'm sorry if I stepped on your toes about your parson. He means well. Only he is a parson, so I suppose he can't help being rather ladylike in business matters. Do drop the subject; I am sick of the whole thing. How is your conservatory, Nell? Are those violets the result of your agricultural efforts?"

"I think, Robert," his sister said, in her low voice, that shivered and broke, "I must just say one thing more: I must give you back this beautiful thing you gave me at dinner. And I must go away with the children."

"What under the sun!" he began, frowning;

R. J.'S MOTHER

then he got up and stood on the hearth-rug, his back to the fire. "Lydia, I hope you are not going to be a fool? What are you talking about? Sit down—sit down! You're as white as a ghost. Lily, I'm afraid you're a great goose. What's the matter?" He could not help softening as he looked at her. She stood there by the little tottering table loaded with its foolish bits of silver, so tense and quivering that even his impatient eyes could not fail to see her agitation.

"Robert, you have been so kind to us; you are so good to us—oh, I don't know how I can do it!"—she broke into an anguished sob—"but I must. Mr. Eaton would never have let the children be supported on money that was not—that was not good."

There was silence; the clock in the hall chimed ten. Then Eleanor Blair, sitting up, pale and angry, said:

"Well, upon my word!"

But her husband looked at his sister with sudden kindness in his eyes. "Lily, you don't understand. When I said what I did to Mr. Hudson—of course, that has put it into your head—I didn't really mean it. In the first place, I'm an honest man (I'll just mention that

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

in passing), but it is not your business nor his to judge my business methods. It isn't a pretty thing to look a gift-horse in the mouth, Lil."

"It isn't what you said to Mr. Hudson," she answered. "I've been thinking about it for nearly a year. Robert, you pay them so little, and I—I have all this."

She looked about the beautiful room with a sort of fright; it seemed to her that the warm and stately walls hid human misery lying close outside—hunger and hatred, cold and sickness, and the terror of to-morrow. The impudent luxury of this enormous wealth struck her like a blow on the mouth.

"They," she said, with a sob, "*are hungry.*"

Her brother, divided between irritation and amusement, was touched in spite of himself.

"My dear Lily," he said, "you can't understand this thing. To put it vulgarly, you've bitten off more than you can chew. Look here, the men can go to work to-morrow if they want to; but they don't want to. I offer them work, and they can take it or leave it. Well, they leave it. It's their affair, not mine."

But she shook her head miserably. "I don't understand it. If you were poor, too, it would be different."

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Well, *really!*" said Mrs. Blair.

But Robert Blair was wonderfully patient.

"There's another thing you must remember, Lily; these people are far better off on what I am willing to pay them than they were in Europe, where most of them came from."

"But, Robert," she said, passionately, "because they could be worse off doesn't seem to be any reason why they shouldn't be better off. And—*it isn't kind.*"

"Kind?" Her brother looked at her blankly, and then, with a shout of laughter: "Lydia, you are as good as a play! No, my dear; I don't run my mills for 'kindness.'"

"But," she said, almost in a whisper, "'whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you—'"

Mrs. Blair made a gesture of disgust.

"—oh, brother, I didn't mean to find fault with you. Only with myself. I—I haven't any right to spend money that I—don't know about."

"Well, anything more?" Robert Blair said, a little tired of her foolishness. "My dear, like the parson, you mean well; but you are a great goose!"

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

As for his wife, she did not even answer Mrs. Eaton's tremulous "good-night."

V

THE husband and wife looked at each other; then Robert Blair flung his head back with a laugh.

"She is perfectly delicious!"

"She is perfectly ungrateful, and I believe she means it."

"Oh, nonsense! Lil hasn't mind enough to mean anything; and I'll tell you another thing: in spite of her quiet ways, she really has a good deal of worldly wisdom. She knows what it is to those two children to have me interested in them. Don't worry your little head—"

"Oh, I don't worry," she answered. "If she is going to presume to criticise you, I don't want her under my roof; the sooner she leaves the better!"

"Spitfire!" he told her, kissing her pretty hand, and forgetting all about his sister's absurdity, and the strike, and the men and women shivering in the tenements down in the miserable mill town.

But he remembered it all the next morning

R. J.'S MOTHER

at the breakfast-table, for Lydia Eaton's white face was too striking to escape comment. Mrs. Blair was not present, preferring to be, at what she called the "brutal hour of eight," in her own room, with a tray and her maid and a novel.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Blair said, kindly. "Are you ill, Lily?"

"It's what I told you last night, Robert," she said, nervously.

The solemn Samuel, all ears, but looking perfectly deaf, brought a dish to his master's elbow. Robert Blair closed his lips with a snap. Then he said:

"Please make no reference to that folly before Eleanor."

But of course it was only a respite. The folly had to be repeated to Eleanor—discussed, argued, denounced, until the whole atmosphere of the house was charged with excitement.

Through it all Lydia Eaton came and went, and did her packing.

"Well," her sister-in-law said, contemptuously, "perhaps you'll tell me how you mean to *feed* Esther and Silas? You have a right to starve yourself, and I have no intention of interfering; but I have some feeling for the children!"

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

"I am going to work," the other answered, trembling.

"Lydia," Mrs. Blair said, passionately, "next to your ingratitude to your brother, I must say your selfishness in ruining your own children is the most dreadful thing I ever heard of!"

But Mrs. Eaton's preparations went on. Not that there was so much to do; but she had to find rooms, and then she had to find work. It was the latter exigency which fanned Robert Blair's contemptuous annoyance which had refused to take the matter seriously, into sudden flames of rage, for his sister saw fit to apply at a shop for the position of saleswoman. Of course it came to his ears, and that night the storm burst on Mrs. Eaton's head. As for Robert Blair, when the interview was over, during which he spared Mrs. Eaton no detail of his furious mortification, he said, savagely, to his wife: "I wish you'd go and see if West cannot bring her to her senses. Get him to influence her to some decency. Tell him, if she's set on this outrageous ingratitude, I wish he would persuade her to let me send her East, to some other place, and let her work (and starve!), where she won't disgrace me. Think of it, Eleanor—that man Davis coming whining and

R. J.'S MOTHER

grinning, and saying he 'would do what he could to give my sister a position as "saleslady," but I knew the times were bad!' Damn him!"

"Good Heavens, Robert! You don't mean to say she's been to Davis's? My dear, she is insane! Yes, I'll go and see Mr. West to-morrow."

She went. It was a raw, bleak morning; the thin, chill winter rain blurred the windows of her brougham, and the mud splashed up against the glass; the wheels sunk into deep ruts of the badly paved streets, and the uncomfortable jolt and sway of the softly padded carriage added to her indignation at her sister-in-law.

William West did not live in the new part of Mercer, with its somewhat gorgeous houses; nor yet in the old part, which was charming and dignified, and inclined to despise everything not itself; but in the middle section, near the rows of rotten and tumbling tenements, and within a stone's-throw of bleak and hideous brick blocks known as "company boarding-houses." He had come here to live shortly after a certain crash in his own life, a personal blow which left him harder and more silent and more earnest. He had been jilted, people

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

said, and wondered why, for a while, and then forgot it, as he, absorbed in his work, seemed also to forget it.

Mrs. Blair, her fox-terrier under one arm, stepped out of the carriage, frowning to find herself in this squalid street; but once inside the big, plain, comfortable house where William West lived all by himself, her face relaxed and took a certain arch and charming discontent; there was a big fire blazing in the minister's library, and the dignity and refinement of the room, the smell of leather-covered books, the gleam of pictures and bronzes, and a charming bit of tapestry hanging on the chimney-piece restored her sense of mental as well as physical comfort. When he entered, and dragged a big chair in front of the fire for her, and looked at her with that grave attention which seems like homage, and was part of the man, being called forth by his washerwoman as well as by Mrs. Robert Blair, she felt almost happy again, and assured that everything would come out right.

"Mr. West," she began, "you've got to help us; we're in such absurd difficulties! Will you?"

"Command me," he said, smiling.

"You haven't heard, then? It's Lydia—

R. J.'S MOTHER

Mr. Blair's sister, you know. She has taken it into her head that"—the color came into Mrs. Blair's face—"that she won't let Robert support her, because she thinks he isn't treating the strikers properly. I'm sure I don't know what idea she has! But she won't accept his money. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

William West's face sobered instantly. "I have not seen Mrs. Eaton for a fortnight," he said; "I had no idea—" He got up, frowning, the lines about his lips perplexed and anxious.

"I'm sure," the pretty woman went on, growing angrier as she spoke, "I don't care what *she* does—I've lost all patience with her—but to throw the children's future away! And it's so embarrassing for Robert." Then she told him fully the whole situation. "She keeps saying," Mrs. Blair ended, "that 'Mr. Eaton' wouldn't have allowed the children to be supported on money that '*wasn't good.*' Did you ever hear such impertinence?"

"Ah, well," he protested, good-naturedly, "I'm sure Mrs. Eaton does not mean to be impertinent; and I'm sure she does appreciate her brother's kindness. Only, she is trying to

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

work out a great problem on an individual basis, which is of course very foolish. But the dear little lady must not be allowed—And yet—” He paused, frowning and perplexed.

“But Mr. West, when she has the assurance to quote the Bible to her own brother—it seems to me that’s rather impertinent? Fancy! something about ‘doing unto others’—and ‘being partaker’ if she spent the money that had been ‘wrung from the strikers.’ Upon my word! ‘Wrung!’ As I said to my husband, ‘Upon my word, I never heard of such a thing.’”

“Neither did I,” William West said, dryly. “We are all of us in the habit of taking our dividends, and not looking at the way they are earned. Mrs. Eaton is certainly unusual.”

“Well, do you think you can influence her?” Mrs. Blair insisted. “I don’t mean to stay with us; I don’t think that would be possible or desirable now. But to let Mr. Blair give her an allowance, so that she can take care of the children. It is positively wicked to think how she is ruining the children!”

“Won’t she take any money from your husband?”

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Not a cent, if you please! Not a penny. She keeps saying that if she can't feel that the source of the money is all right, she can't spend it." Mrs. Blair cuffed her dog prettily with her muff, and kissed his little sleek head. "Isn't she a goose, Pat, you darling?"

"Her principle would turn the world upside down," the clergyman said.

"That's just what I say!" cried Mrs. Blair.

"If we all said we would have nothing to do with the 'blood of the just person,' what would become of the railroads and the coal-mines and the oil trusts? What would become of our dividends from industrial stocks if we insisted on knowing that the workmen were honestly paid? How could we eat meat if we looked into the slaughter-house?"

Mrs. Blair looked puzzled.

"And she is going to work for her living?" He was profoundly moved. "Good Heavens, out of the mouths of babes! What a primitive expression of social responsibility! But surely, Mrs. Blair, we must respect her honesty? As for her judgment, that's another matter."

Eleanor Blair's blank astonishment left her speechless for a moment; then she flung up her head haughtily.

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

“Mr. West, do you mean to say—” she began.

“My dear Mrs. Blair,” he said, quietly, “I mean to say that little Mrs. Eaton, in her simple way, puts her finger right on the centre of this whole miserable question, in which, directly or indirectly, we are all involved: she has recognized our complicity. Of course she is going to work the wrong way—at least, I suppose she is. God knows! But what courage—what directness!”

“Do I understand,” Eleanor Blair said, rising, “that you approve of my sister-in-law’s extraordinary conduct?”

“I approve of *her*,” he said, smiling. “If you ask me whether I think she is doing right, I should say ‘Yes,’ because she is acting upon her conscience. Is she doing wisely? No; because civilization is compromise. We have either got to bow in the House of Rimmon, or go and live in the woods like Thoreau and eat dried pease. I’ll tell her so, if you want me to. But as for attempting to influence her, I cannot do that. The place whereon we stand is holy ground.”

Mrs. Blair picked up her dog and set her teeth; then with half-shut eyes she looked slightly beyond the clergyman, and said:

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Will you be good enough to have my carriage called?"

VI

"I NEVER would have been brave enough," Mrs. Eaton said, meekly, to Mr. West, when the dreadful step was actually taken—"I never could have done it but I knew Mr. Eaton would have wished it; and, besides, I felt I was taking the food of those poor people."

"Well, no," he began, "that is really not reasonable—" But he stopped; this timid creature could not reason—she could only feel. "Fools," he said to himself, as he left her, "rush in where the political economist fears to tread. She is a fool, poor little soul, but—"

The winter had passed heavily away. Mrs. Eaton had succeeded in getting a place in Mr. Davis's shop—"where," the proprietor used to say, "having Robert Blair's sister for a sales-lady is money in my pocket! She's better than a 'fire-and-water bargain sale.'" So she stood behind a counter and sold ribbon, and was stared at and whispered about. But she had very keen anxieties about food and clothes, and the children's discontent lay like a weight

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

upon the mother's heart—which ached, too, with the pain of the second wrench from the affection and kindness of her family. Fortunately her peculiar logic did not lead her to reject the Baptist deacon's money, which was certainly much more doubtful than her brother's. By some mental process of her own, the fact that she worked for it seemed to make its acceptance moral. She had no leisure now to work for Mr. West; but the remembrance of his patience and gentleness always made a little pause of peace in her heavy thoughts. It was a hard, bleak life for this silent little creature; and the rector of St. James's, himself a silent soul, watched her live it, and pondered many things.

The strike had broken in February. The men went back to their work—defeat, like some bitter wind, blowing the flames of resentment into fiercer heat, which “next time” would mean destroying victory.

“Will it be like Samson pulling down the temple upon himself?” William West wondered, depressed and hopeless.

It was night—a summer night—sweet and still over in the old-fashioned part of Mercer, where the fragrance of roses overflowed the high brick walls of the gardens. Here in the mill district it

R. J.'S MOTHER

was not sweet, and all night long the mills roared and crashed, and the flames bursting out of vast chimneys flared and faded, and flared again.

William West was alone in his library. His sermon for the next morning had been finished early in the week; he had looked it over the last thing, and now the manuscript was slipped into its black leather cover. He sat, his head on his hand, tapping with strong, restless fingers the arm of his chair. The old question, always more or less present in the mind of this man, was clamoring for an answer: How far are we responsible? Through how many hands must dishonest money, cruel money, mean money pass to be cleansed? Is it clean when it comes to me—this dividend or that? Shall a man, or a railroad, or a trust deal iniquitously with one of these little ones, and I profit by it? Shall I trace my dollar to its source, and find it wet with tears and blood, and reject it? Or shall I decline to trace it, and buy my bread in innocence? Even the chief priests refused the thirty pieces of silver! Am I an accomplice? For that matter, is the Christian Church an accomplice? What does it say to the philanthropy of thieves? Priests used to take toll from the plunder of robbers, and say mass for

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

their souls in return. Nowadays—"I cover my eyes, but I hold out my hand," he said to himself.

Well—well! The Reverend William West, in his way, was doubtless as great a fool in asking unprofitable questions as was Lydia Eaton. That the existing order would be turned upside down by the introduction of the sense of personal responsibility there can be no doubt. Such an introduction would be the application to the complex egotism of the nineteenth century of the doctrines of a Galilean peasant, who was a communist and the Saviour of the world. It would be the setting forth in individual lives of the spirit of Jesus Christ, the most revolutionary element that could possibly be introduced into society. We are none of us ready for that, though we like to call ourselves Christians.

At least William West was not ready; he had no intention of making himself ridiculous, no matter if he did ask himself unanswerable questions; he was not ready to throw away present opportunities and destroy his influence. Yet, as for Mrs. Eaton—

"Talk about martyrs!" he said to himself, as he sat there at midnight thinking of her, of her hard life, of her splendid foolishness.

R. J.'S MOTHER

“Well, there is one thing I could do for her. Why not? Good God, how selfish I am! I suppose she would think my money was clean? Yes, I could at least do *that*.”

This was no new thought. It had been in his mind more or less for months. He only faced it that night more strenuously.

So it came about that by-and-by he rose, his face set, his mouth hard. He took a key from his watch-chain, and opening a little closet in the side of the chimney, took out a box. He laid it on the table, and sitting down again in his revolving-chair he stared blankly ahead of him. After a while he opened it. . . . There were some letters in it, and a picture, and a crumbling bunch of flowers that looked as though they had once been pansies; he held them in his hand, a bitter sort of amusement in his eyes. The letters he put aside, as though their touch stung him. At the photograph he looked long and intently. Then he bent the card over in his hand, and it broke across the middle. Hastily he gathered these things together and went over to his fire-place. A fire had been laid during the cold spring rains, and the logs were dry and dusty. At the touch of a match, they sputtered and broke into a little roaring flame. William West

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

put his handful of letters and the flowers and the picture gently down in the midst of it, and then stood and watched them burn. When there was only a white film left, on which the sparks ran back, widening and dying, he went over to his desk, and with a certain strong and satisfied cheerfulness he began to write:

“MY DEAR MRS. EATON,—You and I have spoken more than once of your action in leaving your brother’s house, and you know, I am sure, how profoundly I honor and respect your courage in acting upon your convictions. It is this respect which I am venturing to offer you in asking you to honor me by becoming my wife. My sincere regard and appreciation have been yours ever since I first knew you, and if you will consent to make a home for yourself and the children in my house, it will be a home for me, and you know what that will be for a lonely man. If you will consent, I shall be always,

“ Faithfully yours, WILLIAM WEST.”

As he folded the sheet of paper and thrust it into the envelope there was a whimsical look in his eyes.

“A *love-letter!*” he said to himself; but his face was very gentle and tender.

However, the answer to the letter was all that the most ardent lover could desire.

A BLACK DROP

A BLACK DROP

I

AS far back as Lily's memory went, there was always Mammy — Mammy, with soft, humorous black eyes behind silver-rimmed spectacles; with satin-smooth black hair falling in waves over ears in which two gold loops swung and glittered and invited Lily's investigating little white hands; Mammy, big, cushiony, autocratic. Mammy was married, but Lily thought she could remember a time when Augustus had not existed. In those days it had been just Mammy Lacey and Lily Feare. Then Augustus had come, and Lily had not liked him—one of the first things she remembered was not liking Augustus. Yet, except that he had a furtive eye that "saw things," there was no apparent reason why she should not like him. When he referred, in an uneasy whisper, to the things he "saw," Lily used to shrink close to the starched shelter of

R. J.'S MOTHER

Mammy's petticoats, and Mammy, cuddling her, would vociferate, angrily:

"Don' yo' talk that a' way—scaring the chile with yo' spooks!"

Such references, and his way of teasing Mammy to know the size of her bank-account, were all that justified Lily's dislike of Augustus. He was not so light in color as his wife, but he was certainly ten years younger, and he wore beautiful clothes. To be sure, when Mammy sighed over their cost, he snarled, and said she wanted to spend all their money on that make-believe white chile! "Yo'd spend ev'y cent on that Lily, 'cause she's got straight hair—yah!" said Augustus, disgustedly; but he was never unkind to the little girl herself. He knew better. That big, powerful brown arm would "'a' whopped his haid offen him" if he had tried any of his "nigger monkey-shines" on Lily. This warning had been conveyed to him in terms which left nothing to the imagination. When he was co'tin' Miss Lacey (always regrettably uncommunicative about her bank-account), his future attitude to the child was quite clearly, if a little coyly, defined. "Oh, go 'long, Mistah Fostah! Yo' ain't got no arm long enough to go roun' my wais'. Well, there;

A BLACK DROP

that satisfy yo'? How much money I got in the bank? Dollar, maybe. Yere! Don't yo' push Lily offen my lap! Lily's got fust rights in this yere house, ev'y time."

Augustus murmured his apologies. "Whose chile is she, anyway?" he asked.

"None yo' business," Miss Lacey replied, cheerfully.

"Is she white?"

"Look at her," Miss Lacey said.

"I seen 'em as white as that," Augustus demurred.

"Don't say!"

"But who was her father and mother?" Augustus insisted, wheedlingly, and Miss Lacey was briefly explicit: "Fren's o' mine."

Then she added, sternly: "Look a yere, Mistah Fostah, yo' jus' put yo' mind on one thing 'fore we git married, and yo' jus' study on it. Lily, she come fust in this yere house. But I'll treat yo' good, 'Gustus," she melted; for, indeed, Miss Lacey was getting on in years, and Mr. Augustus Foster was a real pretty man and would look well if he was anyways dressed up. Miss Lacey, regarding him, longed to dress him up. She began as soon as they were married, and Augustus took so readily to the dressing-up

R. J.'S MOTHER

process that he forgot his curiosity about Lily, and except when Mammy chose to buy lace for the child's petticoats instead of something for his wardrobe, he did not ask any questions about her. Augustus's love of fine clothes was a distinct drain upon that secret bank-account. Then, suddenly, the drain ceased: about the time Lily was seven years old, Augustus went away from home for three years. Mammy never told Lily where he went, though she explained that he didn't come home because they "kep' the do' locked where he was a stayin'." She moved immediately to the negro quarter of the town, which before she had frankly despised, and she told new and inquiring neighbors a rather elaborate story about "Mistah Fostah's business 'bliging him to live out Wes'." She did not go into particulars concerning the "business," and people rarely pressed for information. There was a background of secretiveness in Mammy's volubility which did not invite questions. But Lily, at any rate, knew that the "locked door" was not far away, because once a month there was a busy time of "gittin' that basket packed for 'Gustus— But mind yo' don't tell nobody who it's for," Mammy always charged her; "if any-

A BLACK DROP

body asks yo', yo' jus' say it's for an orphum 'sylum."

"But, Mammy, it's for 'Gustus."

"Now, Lily, yo' keep yo' li'l mouf shut, honey! Co's' yo' must be a truthful chile; but yo' know Mammy is always kind to orphums. Now eat yo' apple and don' talk."

On the first of the month, when Mammy took the basket to the "orphum 'sylum," she would be away all day; when she got home in the evening she would cry and say: "Po' 'Gustus! Well, he always was a no-'count nigger." Often, in her sympathy, she added: "I'm right glad he gits some comfort out of his spooks, anyhow." But towards the end of Augustus's incarceration, Mammy was less pleased with his ghostly comforters. "He say there's a woman called 'Sarah' comes and talks to him. She must be a po' sort, talkin' to a married man! No lady 'd do it."

When 'Gustus came back from that three years' absence, he asked no more questions about Lily; perhaps they were unnecessary, because a sympathetic wife may have been more communicative than a sweetheart; or perhaps the question of how he could tease a dollar out of Mammy for a séance interested

R. J.'S MOTHER

him more than did Lily's parentage. At that time Augustus "saw" a great many things; his dense black eye was more furtive than ever, and he had a way of speaking suddenly in an undertone to some unseen companion. This habit was most disconcerting to Lily and irritating to Mammy, who believed that he was addressing "*Sarah*." "Yo' spook ain't no lady," she would declare, sullenly.

Her sympathy for Augustus's recent hardships subsided before this jealousy of "*Sarah*," which, however, was always decently disguised as contempt. "I wouldn't care for no woman that didn't have bones in her; I could set down on yo' lady fren' and I'd not know it."

"She'd know it," said Augustus, dryly. But Mammy did not consider the implied reference to her two hundred and fifty pounds unflattering.

Lily was ten years old when Augustus came home, and by that time he was not the only person who had asked questions about her. . . . She was very pretty, with a complexion like the flushed petal of a white rose, and such a child, playing with darky children on Nigger Hill, made both races ask questions. Black mothers said, jealously, that they'd think Mis'

A BLACK DROP

Fostah 'd be 'shamed; "any cullud lady 'd be 'shamed to have a chile like that 'round," these matrons told each other. White mothers (there were white mothers on Mammy's street) said they bet that child was a freak. The white postman wondered; the white ashman hinted at kidnapping; the white policeman felt it his duty, as a representative of law, to ask whose child she was?

"Don' ask *me*," Augustus protested, airily. "M' wife say she's a rearin' of her, 'cause she was a fren' of her pa and ma. But don' ask me!"

Mammy was hardly more communicative. "Yo' mind yo' business! Ain't I got a right to bring up a chile, I don't care what color she is? White? Well, look at her. Co's' she's white. I took her offen her dead mother's breas', and *she* was white as skim-milk."

By-and-by Lily herself asked questions, and then Mammy was reluctantly explicit. "Yo' mother die when yo' was born, and yo' father, he die a li'l' while after. Yas, yo' mother looked just like yo'—white *as* a lily, I always said. An' yo' father, too. When he come to die, yo' father asked me if I'd keep yo'. Co's' I said I would; they was fren's of mine, if they was

R. J.'S MOTHER

white. Yas; they's daid; both of 'em. Yo' father an' yo' mother. They was white people. There! I've tole yo'. Now don't say no mo' about it."

When Mammy said this before Augustus, he looked behind him and winked.

But Mammy was always irritated when Lily asked about her parents. And her irritation cut both ways, for while she resented Lily's satisfaction in being white, she resented more fiercely still any outsider's belief that she was black. "Them chillun say yo's a nigger? Yo' tell 'em to look at yo'! Tell 'em I'll knock they haid's offen 'em if they come 'roun' with such fool talk!"

"Yes, but Mammy, the chillun say you *is* my mammy."

"Go long with yo', Lily! I tol' yo' long ago, yo' mother's daid."

"Was she white?"

"Co's' she was white. Lily-white. Yo' both-er me to death!"

Before she was twelve, Lily had learned that this was the one subject in the world on which it was best not to speak to Mammy. The big, humorous, brown presence could grow dark and thunderous as an August day if that dead father

A BLACK DROP

and mother were referred to. But Lily did not often refer to them. Sentimental tradition to the contrary, Lily, like most orphan children, was not particularly interested in parents whom she could not remember; granting that she could tell teasing, tormenting playmates that they had been white, she did not greatly concern herself about them. Sometimes in answer to the gibe, "White nigger," from some detestable brat, as often black as white, she would retort with an assertion of her parentage, and then run crying home to Mammy for comfort. And Mammy, always furious at the insult, was always angry, somehow, with Lily herself.

"He say yo' live with col'ed people? Well, they's as good as him—po' white trash! And ain't they kind to yo'? What do yo' want, anyhow? If I'd had a white skin, could I 'a' done mo' for yo', Lily?"

As Lily grew older, she knew that no one could have done more. Mammy's love wrapped her in what, for their circumstances, was positive luxury. Lily's desire to have music lessons was met by extra laundry work; a wish for a piano was satisfied by the same means; the girl's love of pretty clothes was so entirely Mrs. Foster's own passion that Lily

R. J.'S MOTHER

did not even have to ask for them; and her soft indolence found no rebuff in Mammy's readiness to wait on her. The only thing this idolizing love could not supply was companionship. Lily had no friends on Nigger Hill. Mammy had not permitted any intimacies with the young colored people of the neighborhood, though Lily, when she was a child, would have accepted them readily enough; but Mrs. Foster said she wasn't agoin' to have Lily "mixin' with no col'ed trash." There were white people on Nigger Hill, but Lily had been bidden not even to look at them. "They ain't fit to look at or they wouldn't be yere; I'll whop yo' li'l' head off, honey, if you speak to one of 'em," Mammy told her, earnestly. Thus, from lack of opportunity, the child made no friends among white people; by-and-by, when opportunity offered, she did not take it, for, as she grew older, she began to realize the anomaly of her position, and to feel, rightly or wrongly, that white people doubted her white skin. This made her at once more sensitive and more secretive. When she was wounded she no longer ran home to cry on Mammy's breast. She kept poignant innuendos to herself; but she recoiled from circumstances in which such

A BLACK DROP

innunendos might be made. That was why, at school, she made no friends among her own race. The girls in her class apparently accepted her as one of themselves, but Lily was perfectly aware that, in spite of their easy intimacy, they speculated about her: "Why, she's just as fair as we are!" "Yes; but my father says he's seen them perfectly white." "But look at her hair! it's as straight as mine." . . . Lily felt these furtive guesses, even if she did not hear them, and she knew that even her teachers wondered a little. . . . Miss Wales, an elderly New England woman, who had come to Mercer many years before to teach mathematics in the Girls' High School, asked her point-blank as to her birth. Lily told her briefly all she knew: her father and mother had been white people; when they died Mammy had taken her and given her a home. "She's treated me just like I was her own chile," Lily said, gently.

"'Child,'" said Miss Wales; and immediately set public opinion right as to the girl's race. But she used to watch her with kind, puzzled eyes, into which, by-and-by, Lily began to look for sympathy and understanding. Thus it was, when she was almost seventeen, that Lily felt

R. J.'S MOTHER

she had a friend—a friend whom she could go to see, and who would occasionally come to see her.

She was out when Miss Wales made her first call at the story-and-a-half frame house, lopsided and crumbling to decay on one of Mercer's narrow, dirty streets. Mammy, in the little crowded parlor, where Lily's piano blocked the front window, received her visitor with the beautiful courtesy of her race.

"Set down, ma'am," she said, beaming benignantly through her silver-rimmed spectacles; "well, now, I suttinly am glad to see yo'. An' I'm glad Lily's got some fren's beside me and 'Gustus; specially as my health ain't right strong."

"Is Mr. Foster fond of Lily, too?"

"I reckon he know he bettah be! Oh yes; he's good to Lily; but he's got things on his mind. Spirits, ma'am. Spooks, I call 'em. He has one—her name's 'Sarah.' Co's' he's welcome!" Mammy's plush patent rocker creaked with her jealous rocking. "But I'm acquainted with manners, ma'am; my folks was quality; an' I don' like to have a married man talkin' befo' Lily of his lady fren'."

Miss Wales's sympathy might have ventured into the maze of spiritual improprieties, but at

A BLACK DROP

that moment Augustus, beautifully dressed, slid hesitatingly into the room. He gave a furtive look behind him, as though sharing with some unseen presence his excitement at a white visitor; but he acknowledged Mammy's introduction with a deep bow and a polite reference to Lily.

"She's a good girl; her mammy and me's done th' bes' we could for her. Co's' she ain't my chile; but I'm jus' as kin' to her as ef she was."

On the door-step, as she was going away, Miss Wales met Lily, who blushed with pleasure at finding her teacher here, in her own home. "Come and see me sometime," Miss Wales said, cordially. "No, no! I don't mean at school. Come to my house some afternoon at five. My tea-kettle always boils then, and we can talk of something else than the square of the hypotenuse!"

Lily did not understand the reference to the tea-kettle, but she went, in her prettiest dress, and learned about tea-kettles, and by-and-by she learned many other things. Indeed, in the next year, she so quickly adapted herself to the externals of refinement that once in a while Miss Wales had misgivings. . . . After all, con-

R. J.'S MOTHER

sidering how she must live, was it for the girl's happiness to eat of the tree of æsthetic knowledge? But that was the winter that Mammy began to fail, and in her sympathy with the incongruous and anxious household, not even Miss Wales's conscientiousness could snub the dog-like love which looked at her out of Lily's soft, melancholy eyes. The silent young creature came very often to that pleasant tea-table. And gradually she began to carry her head as Miss Wales carried hers; she walked as the older woman walked; she spoke with inflections characteristic of her teacher's extremely cultivated voice, but with a certain soft note that was all her own. It came so gradually that Miss Wales herself did not recognize the "sincerest flattery"; and Lily was perfectly unaware of it. But it was about that time that she began to have moments of acute race consciousness. She began to think of Mammy's and 'Gustus's friends as *negroes*, not merely as neighbors that she did not know very well; she began to say to herself, constantly, that she was white and Mammy was black. Sometimes a horror of the blackness about her seized her like some dark hand tightening on her white throat; then she would ask herself,

A BLACK DROP

frantically, what she should do to get out into white life? But these acute moments were not frequent. Mammy's love was such a warm shelter from facts that for the most part this new consciousness was only the peculiar melancholy which is rooted in the knowledge of being out of place. This melancholy, and the refinement—which was none the less genuine because imitative—and, of course, her exquisite fairness, made Lily very noticeably out of place on Baker Street. Indeed, by the time she was nineteen, she was a noticeable presence anywhere—graceful, sad, and extraordinarily pretty.

Framely Stone, a budding lawyer, and a newcomer in Mercer, whose mind should have been occupied with the briefs that did not come, found her distinctly noticeable when he met her one afternoon at Miss Wales's. Young Framely had gone, like the good boy he was, to have a cup of tea with his old Sunday-school teacher. And here, at the piano, playing softly in the dusk, was this silent creature in a purple dress, whose voice, when she said "good-evening," had a liquid note that charmed the young Yankee, transplanted for business reasons to this noisy, dirty, Middle-West town. When Lily, saying she must go, rose from the

R. J.'S MOTHER

piano-stool with a slow, indolent movement, full of grace, Framely saw her to the door, and then came back to demand information.

"She's a peach!" he said, being of that generation which has such strange taste in adjectives.

"Yes, she's pretty, I suppose," said Miss Wales, sighing; "and she's white."

"White?" repeated the young fellow. "What do you mean? Of course she is white!"

When she told him what she meant he was explosively sympathetic. "How perfectly dreadful! Living entirely among colored people! Not that they are not all right; I am of good old abolition stock, as you know, and color doesn't make a particle of difference to me. Only, it must be fiendishly lonely for her. I suppose they are servants, in a way?"

"Oh, not in the least; she is like their own child. She eats with them, and all that. That's one reason, I suppose, why she doesn't make friends at school. White girls don't go to see her at her own house, you know."

"I don't know anything of the sort," the boy retorted. "*I'd* go and see her, darned quick!"

And Miss Wales, caressing a very ill-tempered fox terrier who lounged condescendingly

A BLACK DROP

against her knee, looked at him over her glasses and said to herself: "Not if I could prevent it, my young friend." Aloud she explained that about a fortnight ago Mrs. Foster, whose health had been gradually failing, had become so seriously ill that Lily was obliged to stay at home and nurse her; she had called that afternoon to say that she was still unable to return to school.

"I made her stop and play for me a little while," Miss Wales ended; "she loves music as much as she hates mathematics. Poor child! If she loses time now, it means not graduating."

"She has a lovely complexion," said the young lawyer. And Miss Wales said, impatiently, that she was not interested in Lily's complexion, but in her geometry.

"It was all I could do to pull her along, anyhow; I know she thought it very arbitrary that two and two should make four! Poor Lily, she is so refined and pretty, I often wonder what will become of her! I wish she would marry some nice young clerk; but respectable white men don't frequent Nigger Hill, and she can't marry a col—"

"Oh, Lord, no!" Stone broke in, disgusted-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ly. "Of course, my grandfather was a roaring old abolitionist, and I've been brought up on the finest kind of theories; but I don't stand for—"

"No," said Miss Wales, dryly, "of course you don't. Nobody does, Frame, of the superior race, no matter what their theories are. Your grandfather's were fine, but he would have had cold shivers up and down his back at the idea of a white girl marrying a darky."

"The idea is infinitely shocking to me," Stone said, frowning. "I don't know just why, but it is."

"I know why," Miss Wales said, curtly; "it is something bigger than you, Frame; bigger than your reason; bigger than your theories; it is instinct. The white man who marries a negro pushes his race back; and if he doesn't feel the repulsion of it, there is something wrong with him! Your disgust is just a race protest, a race horror. It is organic, its biological; it has nothing to do with reason. The finest kind of theories tumble down before it!"

Stone nodded. "Yes," he said, "when you put a theory against instinct, you are just bucking the universe. Queer, isn't it? And those fine old birds, the abolitionists, never took

A BLACK DROP

that into account! And yet, you know, that absurd question the Southerner always asks, 'Would you want your daughter to marry a nigger?' is rooted right in that very thing. But any such idea in relation to Miss Feare is hideous! It doesn't come into consideration at all. What does interest me is that she should be a—a lady, don't you know? After all, a girl, even of birth (as Miss Feare plainly is), does get something from her bringing up, and Miss Feare has only had this old colored woman, and—"

Miss Wales laughed. "My dear boy, how young you are! In the first place, there is no reason to think that she is a girl of 'birth,' as you call it. And in the next place a nice old colored woman like Mrs. Foster has far better manners than many white people. No; please don't be expecting that poor Lily has a strawberry-mark on her left arm, for I assure you she has not."

"Well, anyway, she's a peach," said Framely Stone.

II

It was a day or two after this meeting in Miss Wales's parlor that Mammy was suddenly

R. J.'S MOTHER

felled by a stroke of paralysis. She crashed down in her tracks without an instant's warning, and Augustus in his terror fled into the street, calling loudly for help—which instantly swarmed out of all the dingy doorways, scared and eager and kind. All that day the little house on Baker Street was crowded with black faces that peered in upon Mammy as she lay prisoned in silence. At first the prying curiosity was mixed with fright; but by-and-by as awe wore off, open, child-like pleasure in a morbid situation brought the friendly creatures trooping into the room; they sat about all day, chattering to each other or murmuring condolences to Augustus, while Mammy, deep in her feather-bed, covered with a red-and-white patchwork quilt, lay like a stone. There was not a quiver of recognition, even when Lily bent over her or washed the motionless face and leaden hands. "But I'm sure she knows me," Lily insisted. And the crowding women sympathized, and then burst into noisy talk. Sometimes there was an ejaculatory prayer; sometimes a cadenced outburst of singing; sometimes vociferating advice; sometimes, even, loud gurgles of laughter; but always kindness. Lily, moving among them, dazzlingly white

A BLACK DROP

against their blackness, found the kindness comforting, the curiosity natural. Her sense of *difference* vanished in anxiety and grief; disaster instantly knitted her to these good friends, who were so ready to help Mammy.

That night there were a dozen offers to "sit up." But Augustus refused them all. "I can look after her," he said, irritably. Now that his terror was over, he was eager to dispense with the help he had summoned, and when, assisted by his impatience, the visitors took their reluctant departure, and he and Lily sat in the faintly lighted room listening to the dreadful breathing, his reason for wishing to be alone was apparent: it was his opportunity to find Mammy's bank-book! Whispering constantly to some one who stood, unseen, beside him, he began the search. . . . Every bureau drawer, every crevice in the closet, every box, every trunk. Then he got down on his hands and knees and felt under the carpet. Once he even thrust a shrinking hand under Mammy's mattress, and once he clawed with lean, brown fingers at the bricks on the hearth. "Ef yo'd tell me where it is," he whispered, angrily, to Lily, "I wouldn't be wastin' my time."

"But I don't know," she whispered back.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't look for it. 'Gustus, please don't!"

She felt him brush against her as, on hands and knees, he crawled about the room, tapping the surbase and talking rapidly in a whisper to "*Sarah*." On all-fours, panting heavily, he looked in the half-light like some sinister animal. Towards morning he gave it up. "Them women can watch to-night, if they want to," he said, sullenly; "it ain't in this yere room, anyhow."

All that first week he searched the rest of the house and teased Lily. "'*Sarah*' tole me to take care of the book, fear it might get los'. I guess Mammy lef' it at the bank. So now yo' tell me her bank, Lily, that's a good girl."

"I don't know, 'Gustus," Lily would say, over and over.

"Well, now, honey, ef yo' tell me, I'll tell yo' something '*Sarah*' tole me 'bout yo' pa!"

And Lily would shake her head, smiling. "'Gustus, truly I don't know. What did '*Sarah*' say about my father?"

The dark face opposite her grimaced angrily. "I bet yo' know where it is! Well, yo' pa's in the spirit world, but he ain't in the same

A BLACK DROP

sphere as 'Sarah.' 'Sarah' was a very godly lady in the mortal life."

"What did she say about him?"

"She said he was white. An' rich. He wasn't no po' white trash, I'll say that for him. Well, he say: 'Tell Lily to meet me in heaven.'"

Lily looked at him eagerly. "Did 'Sarah' say anything about my mother, 'Gustus? Oh, I would like to know something about my mother."

Augustus, glancing over his shoulder, chuckled: "Hi, 'Sarah'!" he said, softly, "do yo' hear that?"

Since that Thursday afternoon when Mr. Framely Stone dropped in to have a cup of tea with Miss Wales, Lily had thought constantly of that dead father and mother; she thought of them even while she watched, frightened and grieving, by Mammy's bedside in the little, hot, musky room crowded with kind black faces. . . . Oh, if they had only lived! She was angry at them because they had not lived; she had a resentful feeling that Mammy—poor, speechless Mammy, *a colored woman*, had been better to her than her own father and mother!

R. J.'S MOTHER

“Why did they go and die and leave me?” she said to herself, passionately.

That half-hour of sitting silently at the piano, listening to Stone and his old teacher, had been a bleak revelation of how entirely she had lost her birthright. Her life—at any rate, as long as Mammy lived—must always be as it had been, for she could never leave Mammy—Mammy, who had taken her in and given her a home! It would break Mammy’s heart. No; she, a white girl, must live among black people! “Perhaps I’ll get black, too,” she thought, in a surge of childish terror. For very relief from such thoughts she took shelter in the memory of that wonderful half-hour at Miss Wales’s: what beautiful gray eyes Mr. Framely Stone had, and how they had looked into hers, down deep, deep into hers! Then the beautiful eyes had looked away with the embarrassment of impetuous, admiring youth; and at the same moment Lily’s own eyes had dropped and a faint rose color deepened on her smooth cheek.

Of course Miss Wales, cuffing her terrier for his insensate barking and pouring out another cup of tea for herself, had not seen these meeting, faltering young eyes. But she had found

A BLACK DROP

Framely Stone's interest in Lily a little disquieting, and she made up her mind that there should be no further fireside encounters—at least, if she could help it. "He hasn't got any father and mother to look after him," said Miss Wales, "and I don't propose to receive any posthumous reproaches when I get to heaven." To prevent such heavenly unpleasantness, Miss Wales told Framely that Sunday was the best time to call, as she was always free then. "My pupils—dear children!—pursue me to my fire-side on week-days; so come on Sundays, will you, Frame?"

"Certainly," Stone said, a little blankly.

And when Lily came to tell her of Mammy's seizure, Miss Wales, with a sympathetic arm about the girl's shoulders, took occasion to mention that thereafter she would be glad to see her any day but Sunday. "I am apt to be engaged then," she said; "you won't mind, will you, my dear?"

And Lily said, nervously, "Of co's' not."

"Of course," Miss Wales corrected her, smiling.

Both young people had listened respectfully, and Framely had called on the next Thursday; while on Sunday afternoon Lily walked half-

R. J.'S MOTHER

way to Miss Wales's and back again, to get some fresh air—which, indeed, she sadly needed, for though Mammy was better to the extent of being placed each morning in a chair by the kitchen stove, and sitting there in icy silence all day long, still, the necessary service and nursing was very taxing to Lily's strength.

Framely's week-day call had been unproductive—at least, in regard to meeting a girl in a purple dress playing a nocturne in the twilight; but it did give him a chance to ask questions about her, which were answered so curtly that the young gentleman said to himself, crossly, that he would be hanged if he was going to waste his time on any more duty calls; he would take a walk on Sundays, he said. So that was how it came about that all Miss Wales's foresight was of no avail, for the very next Sunday afternoon, when Stone went moodily out to walk, they met, these two young creatures, as the gods had ordained they should—met, and walked the length of the River Road; and Lily told him how she hated to fall behind in her geometry, but she had to stay at home and take care of Mrs. Foster—"Mammy, I call her," said Lily, shyly.

"I believe that was very customary in the



“A MAN FEELS PRETTY LONELY WITHOUT ANY—SISTERS, DON'T YOU KNOW?”

A BLACK DROP

South, in the planter class, wasn't it?" Stone asked, deferentially. Upon which, naturally, she told him her little story. A princess in a black prison, a lily in an alien soil! into such terms did this besotted young man translate to himself Mammy's kindness to an orphan baby. Then, of course, he told her his story: "I haven't any people, and a man feels pretty lonely without any—sisters, don't you know. I'm going to live in Mercer"—then he broke off to inveigh against Mercer's noise and soot; and Lily thought that that was because he was just perfectly grand, for ordinary people didn't mind dirt and noise.

"I suppose we are used to it yere," said Lily. And Stone said that he hoped she wouldn't mind his saying so, but he thought the Southern accent perfectly delicious! Lily looked gently bewildered, but the young man did not wait for any reply; he plunged into talk of all the things in heaven and earth and the eternities that he knew nothing about. The girl listened and agreed to everything he said, her soft, sad eyes betraying her conviction that he was the wisest person in the world. It was the same old story of the boy and the girl, no matter what color their skins may be! But indeed their skins were

R. J.'S MOTHER

just alike, except that Lily's was fairer than that of the tanned and ruddy fellow at her side.

III

THERE is no need to tell just how it went. . . . As for *why* it went, who can say? Framely Stone, at any rate, was not interested in such an analysis; he must have known that it was not her mind that made him love her, for in her gentle silences, her slow, monosyllabic replies to his outpourings, no mind was visible; it was not the poor, good child's goodness that attracted him, for he really did not know how very good she was; it was not her humor, for she had none; it was not even her beauty, for he thought very little about it; it may, perhaps, have been the appeal to his chivalry—the chance to rescue; but if it were so the youth himself did not know it. No, Framely could not say what he saw in Lily, nor why he was crazily in love with this simple creature of another world, though not of another race; this girl whose refinement was, of course, a negligible quantity rather than anything positive—a lack of vulgarity rather than any true perception of beauty and fitness; whose goodness lay in doing

A BLACK DROP

her humble duty; whose intellect was only able to adore and to imitate. He did not know or care *why* he loved her; he loved her! That was enough. He never knew just when he fell in love; it pleased him to tell her that it was the first moment he had seen her, sitting at the piano, in her purple dress, with one hand straying idly over the keys, and the other resting on the head of Miss Wales's shrill fox terrier. But he did not get to this point of confidence for some three months after that first walk. Meantime, there was a call at the house on Baker Street (a call which made Framely Stone feel just a little sick; that dreadful locality! that parlor—Augustus—Mammy; *And Lily!*—a jewel in an ebony setting!): then no more calls, but a concert or two, and many walks. On one of these she told him that it was terrible to see only colored people.

"I don't mean Mammy. I love Mammy," Lily said, loyally, but her lip quivered. It was on their next walk, one September afternoon, that he told her he loved her. Lily, dazed at the wonder and the glory of it, stammered she knew not what; and then, in the lonely dusk of an old covered bridge, the young man took her in his arms for one swift kiss that left him

R. J.'S MOTHER

trembling with the new solemnity of joy. Lily was stunned into rapturous silence, and for a while, as they stood looking down at the black water lapping and whispering against the stone pier in midstream, there was only a broken word or two from Framely and a murmur from Lily. When they got into the open country and were walking under the yellowing branches, the young man told her what he wanted: an immediate marriage.

“At once, dear,” he said—“at once! You must come away from—from that old life, my Lily; oh, my white, white Lily! Of course, dear, my gratitude to Mrs. Foster for her care of you makes it my privilege as well as my duty to do everything I can for her. But I must take you quite away, darling; *you* understand, my white Lily?”

“You don’t mean you don’t want me ever to—to see Mammy?” Lily said, in a frightened voice.

And he reassured her tenderly. “Of course not, you angel! As if I would interfere with your angelic sense of duty!”

And then he talked about their future, and his wonderful love, the like of which had never been known in all the ages of the whole round world;

A BLACK DROP

and he wanted to know what was the first minute that she had "given him a second thought?" And she was so absorbed in worshipping him that she could not find any words to reply. So it was. . . . Again the old story. Again the new wonder.

It was quite dark when he left her at Mammy's door on Baker Street. "Shall I come in and tell her, dearest?" he said; but she shook her head.

"She does not understand anything," she said, sadly.

There were several dark passers-by on Baker Street, but she supposed he would kiss her when he said good-night—it was the custom of lovers on Baker Street to part thus kindly. Instead he held her hand in a brief clasp, and then, lifting his hat, went lightly down the rickety wooden steps and was swallowed up in the autumnal dusk. Lily's heart came up into her throat at the wonder of it.

As for Stone, he went to his rooms and wrote to Miss Wales, announcing his good-fortune in the usual formula of ecstatic youth, and closing with the assurance that he would never forget that he had met his happy fate in her house; also, that he would come round after dinner and tell her all about it.

R. J.'S MOTHER

Poor old Miss Wales put his letter down and said, distractedly, "Good *Heavens!*" It was only Miss Wales to whom the news could be painful. Framely Stone had no close relations to be distressed by such a marriage; as for his connections, they were like our own—ready to be agreeably shocked and intensely interested in seeing him make a fool of himself. Only Miss Wales was near enough to the situation, and to him personally, to feel positive dismay, and even grief. Indeed, she reproached herself, almost to the point of tears—as if she could have prevented the gods, poor old lady!—but to the happy lover, when, dutiful and stubborn, he presented himself after dinner for the reproaches he knew would come, she only said, bluntly:

"Of course you know I am not pleased."

"Why not?" he said, cheerfully.

"You know why as well as I do," she retorted.

"She's poor," Framely admitted, smiling.

Miss Wales frowned. "Please don't be foolish."

"She lives with colored people," he confessed, still smiling.

"Well, if you want to put it that way, yes.

A BLACK DROP

You know what I mean, Frame," she ended, pathetically.

She was so plainly upset that Framely Stone—who was really a very nice boy, though irritated, as a boy naturally would be at opposition in love affairs—Frame sobered a little, and said that he did know what she meant. "Or what you think you mean," he amended. "You see, Miss Wales, you don't understand Lily. I don't believe any woman could. She is—well, I can't seem to express how perfectly—why, *wonderful*, don't you know?—she is! I can't put it into words!" the boy despaired. "Oh, Miss Wales, she *understands* when I talk to her!"

"Well," Miss Wales admitted, dryly, "I suppose it is convenient to have a wife who understands when she is spoken to; but—"

"Oh, you are on the outside," Framely interrupted; "you can't see anything but her circumstances. I admit they're dreadful. I am perfectly open-minded. I can see how it strikes you—a young white girl shut out from all the opportunities not only of her class but of her race. That's how it looks to you, on the surface; but below the surface—her mind! her soul! Miss Wales, it is like finding a jewel in an ash-heap!"

R. J.'S MOTHER

Miss Wales shook her head dolefully. "Framely, please don't be poetical; it's all I can do to get my breath, without trying to follow poetical flights. Frame, I don't want to be an interfering old maid, but you know, my dear boy, your mother and I were very dear friends, and your father was a sort of forty-second cousin, so I have a right to be anxious about you. And, of course, this is a dreadful mistake."

Framely sat down on a hassock beside her and took her hand. "Scold me all you want to; it shows you care about me. There isn't another living being that likes me enough to scold me. But please like my Lily, too."

Miss Wales groaned. "What on earth do you see in her!"

Of course, only a logical old maid, who was also a school-marm, would have asked such a question; as if Framely Stone, or any other lover, could say what he "saw"! When the young man, stumbling among his adjectives, tried to answer her, Miss Wales gave up and listened to his ecstasies with what patience she could. But under her patience she was nerving herself. . . . Her hand, when she laid it upon his arm as he rose to go, positively trembled. "I suppose," she said, with a little breathless

A BLACK DROP

laugh, "that class differences are not really vital; or even differences in cultivation; though I have always thought, poor old maid that I am!—that it would be necessary to have at least the same taste in jokes; but—" Miss Wales was really frightened. "Framely, please don't be angry, but I must ask you just one thing: Are you sure she—*is white?*"

She felt his arm suddenly contract under the shock of her words. He shook her hand off and turned fiercely upon her. "Oh, Frame, dear," she entreated him, "I have to say it. You must be sure, Framely."

"I am sure," he said, frigidly.

"Why are you sure?" she asked; and added, in a whisper: "I have never been sure."

"You insult her!" he cried out, "I can't discuss this with you." Then he softened, for the kind old face was trembling. "I beg your pardon. I know you only mean it in kindness to me. But I want you to be kind to Lily, too, and—that was an awfully cruel thing to say, Miss Wales. Yes, I *am* sure! Perfectly sure. I have Lily's own word for it."

"And whose word does Lily have?" she said, softly.

"Whose?" Framely repeated, astounded.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"Why, Mrs. Foster's, of course. Mrs. Foster told her her parents were white. And who would know better?"

"Nobody," said Miss Wales, significantly.

The smouldering anger in the young man's honest gray eyes leaped into flame. "You think Mrs. Foster is a liar? I wouldn't have believed that you could be so unjust!—just because she is colored. Thank God, I have no prejudices of that kind. That poor, nice old woman! And you told me yourself that she had the most beautiful manners in the world!"

"Do you think beautiful manners and truthfulness are necessarily synonymous? Still, I don't in the least mean that she is what you call a 'liar.' I merely mean that her pride—you know she is very light herself—and most of all her love for Lily, might—well, she might love the child enough to deny her, don't you know?"

"Oh, say she 'lies,'" Stone said, coldly. "Don't try to save my feelings. All I can say is you are wrong. Absolutely, thoroughly, entirely wrong. Lily is as white as her name! Through and through, body and soul.

"I have never doubted the whiteness of her soul," said Miss Wales, and then her impa-

A BLACK DROP

tience hardened into the purpose of protection. "Framely, I have seen people with colored skins who had Anglo-Saxon minds, and isn't it, perhaps, possible to have an Anglo-Saxon skin and a negro mind? And Lily, poor, dear Lily, her mind—" She caught at his arm as he turned furiously away. "Frame, wait, dear boy! Listen. I only want you to face the possibility."

"There is no such possibility!"

Miss Wales's silence was more emphatic than words, and Stone, to the accompaniment of the terrier's distracted barking, took his departure with all the formality of offence.

As for his old friend, vainly bidding her dog be quiet, she went back to her little parlor and stood for a long time, staring at the blazing coal in the grate. "It would be safer," she was saying to herself—"safer if he could have said, 'I don't care if she *isn't* white.' But he could not say that," said Miss Wales.

Miss Wales was not the only person to be upset by learning what had happened on the River Road that night. . . .

When Lily, her dazzled eyes wide with happiness, pushed open the door of the house on

R. J.'S MOTHER

Baker Street, she found Mammy bundled up in the red-and-white patchwork quilt, motionless in her big chair, and Augustus at the table fussing with the reluctant wick of a kerosene lamp. He frowned with relief when Lily entered.

"Yere, yo', Lily!" he said, irritably, "I can't fix this yere lamp. Seems to me yo's mighty neglectful of yo' Mammy these days. I had to feed her myself, yo' so late."

Lily contritely steadied the lamp-chimney before she took off her hat, while Augustus, glancing behind him, said, in a whisper: "What, ma'am?" and waited for some voiceless reply. Then he said:

"So yo' Stone fellah come home with yo'? Yo' ought to be 'shamed o' yo'self, Lily; ef yo' Mammy had her senses she wouldn't 'low no such goin's on with a white fellah."

Lily was not listening; she went over and knelt down by Mammy, putting her arms around the inert figure, and saying something in a joyous whisper; then she looked passionately up into the deaf, unheeding face.

"Oh, Mammy, *can't* you hear? Dear Mammy! you would be so glad if you knew!"

Augustus had spread an evening paper out

A BLACK DROP

under the lamp, and was laboriously spelling his way down its pink columns; perhaps he heard and guessed, perhaps "*Sarah*" whispered it in his ear; he lifted his head sharply and looked at Lily, smiling and crying, and stroking the poor numb hands. There was a minute's silence, then, abruptly crumpling his pink sheet together, he rose, and resting his thin palms flat on the table he leaned over towards her:

"What? What's that? Has he been makin' up to yo'?—I won't have no such doin's!"

"'Gustus! Mammy, hear that wicked 'Gustus! Listen to me: he has asked me to marry him, that gentleman has. I am going to marry Mr. Stone!"

"Him, marry yo'?" said Augustus. His black lips drew back from his yellowing teeth in an incredulous laugh. "Go 'long!" he said.

"It is true," said Lily. "I don't care whether you believe it or not—if I can only make Mammy understand it!"

Augustus gaped with amazement. "He want to *marry* yo'?" he said, in honest bewilderment; then abruptly he turned his head and listened. "Yas, co's' I'll ask her," he said; "she's got to tell me now, ef she's goin' off with a white

R. J.'S MOTHER

man.—Lily, ef yo're goin' to git married and go off, yo' got to gimme Mammy's book."

"How can I, when I don't know where it is?"

"Ef yo' don' tell me," he threatened, "yo' sha'n't go outen this yere house."

"But I don't know," she insisted, impatiently.

"I'll make yo' tell me," he said, softly, and crouched a little, as if about to spring. "Lily: yo' hear me? Where?"

"Mammy!" the girl cried, shrinking close to the big, motionless figure. "Mammy, I'm 'fraid of him! 'Gustus, I *don't* know."

"Well, then, yo'll stay right yere in this house. Yo' white fellow won't marry yo' when I tell him—yo' ain't white."

Lily stared at him. She was so frightened that his words had no meaning. "I don't know where it is," she repeated, faintly.

"'Sarah,' she talked with yo' pa. He tole her yo' wasn't white. Mammy is yo' mother. 'Sarah' says so."

The sense of it reached her then, and at the same instant its foolishness. She gave him a contemptuous glance. "I don't care what 'Sarah' says, and Mr. Stone won't care, either. 'Gustus, I can't tell you about the book. I can't tell you what I don't know, can I?"

A BLACK DROP

"Then I'll tell yo' somethin' I do know," he began. "Mr. Stone won't care what 'Sarah' say? Maybe he'll care what Mammy say? Mammy tole me—now this is truth, as I'm alive; yo' Mammy tole me that yo' was her own chile. Will Mr. Stone marry yo' when I tell him that, Mammy's chile?"

The light of the lamp shone on his malicious grin, and glistened faintly in the fixed blackness of the unseeing eyes that stared from the other side of the table. Lily put her hand up as if to ward off a blow. "*Mammy's—child?*" she said, in a whisper.

"Yas," Augustus assured her, loudly. "She's yo' mother. Yo' don' take stock in '*Sarah?*' Well, yo'll believe yo' own mother, maybe? She tole me all about it. Yo' father's dead. He was white—else, co's' I wouldn't 'a' married her. I'm a perfect gem'man. Ef yo'll tell me the bank, I won't tell yo' white fellah."

Lily, with a cry turned, and flung herself against Mammy's knee. "Mammy, you're not—? You're not—? *Can't you hear me!*" She clutched the great inert arm and shook it. "Listen! You—you are a colored woman. You are not my—my—? Say you are not—say you are not?"

R. J.'S MOTHER

And Augustus, over his shoulder, observed, "Listen to her, ma'am — denyin' her own mother!"

IV

FRAMELY had suggested, very gently, that it would be better for them to walk together than for him to call on Lily. His first call on Nigger Hill, when he had been received in Mammy's parlor, with its musky smell, its tawdry furnishings, its photographs of black faces, was a nightmare to him. Remembering it, he said that it would be pleasanter to walk. Lily agreed, of course. She would have agreed to anything, poor, happy, bewildered child. So when a little note came from her the very next morning, asking him to call, his instant thought, as he hurried to her, was that she was ill.

And, indeed, she looked very ill, the frozen white creature, with pallid lips and black shadows under her eyes. She opened the door in answer to his ring, and as he stepped in he had a glimpse of the kitchen at the end of the little hall, and the shining stove, and Mammy's fixed face above the red-and-white quilt. When they entered the parlor, Framely held out joyous arms.

A BLACK DROP

"Wait a minute," Lily said. "First, I want to tell you . . . 'Gustus says . . . I am not—white."

Framely, his arms still outstretched, looked at her vacantly, then, laughing, caught her to his breast. "What are you talking about?" he said, gayly. Lily, trembling, pushed him away from her and looked into his face, speechless.

"Lily, darling! What's the matter?"

"He says—I am not—white," she repeated, breathlessly.

Framely Stone gasped, as if he had been struck below the belt. He said, hurriedly: "What? What?"

"Augustus says Mammy is my mother. Mammy is colored."

"He is a liar!" the young man said. "Lily, you sha'n't stay another hour in the same house with the beast. He is a liar!"

"I don't know," Lily said, numbly.

"I know!" Framely cried. "Why, my darling, my dearest, didn't Mrs. Foster herself tell you dozens of times—"

"Yes," Lily agreed, heavily; "but 'Gustus says that was because she was so proud because I was—light. He says she told him that she was my mother."

R. J.'S MOTHER

They looked at each other in silence; then the boy said, harshly: "Of course, it is a lie! One has but to look at you— But Mrs. Foster will tell us."

"She can't speak," Lily reminded him.

"But she must, she *must!*" he said; "that fool can't be allowed to say such things—"

"I don't see that I am any different," she said, faintly. "I am just the same as I was— last night." She gave him a bewildered look. "Ain't I?" she asked, in a frightened voice.

"Yes, yes; of course you are!" he cried, and took her in his arms and kissed her. "It is all a hideous lie," he assured her. And then, with his lips against her cheek, he whispered, as lovers love to do, his challenge to Fate: "And suppose it wasn't a lie? I love you! I love you! And nothing makes any difference where there is love. But it is a lie."

He felt her delicate body relax in his arms and sag down upon his breast, but the storm of reassuring denial brought the color back to her face. "It frightened me so," she said, timidly, and smiled, with the tears wet on her dark lashes. "But I am sure you are right; why, Mammy's told me hundreds of times that my father and mother were white people."

A BLACK DROP

"Of *course!*" he said, and then made her tell him just what had happened. When he heard it all he demanded to see Augustus. Together he and Lily went out into the kitchen. There, standing between Mammy, motionless in her chair, and Augustus, cringing behind the table and whispering agitatedly to some unseen confederate, Stone wrung from the mulatto every accusing word—not one of which was evidence.

"You lie!" the lawyer flung at him, contemptuously. He was aflame with generous and protecting love; with the frightened creature trembling against his arm, chivalry cast out fear. "We'll prove him a liar, dearest," he assured her, over and over; "don't think of the thing again!"

But when he left her and walked home through the squalid streets, somewhere back in his mind the thing lifted its evil head. . . . Suppose that Augustus had not—lied? All that day the thought, repudiated and denied, returned to dog him; late in the evening he went out to tramp through the darkness to get rid of the devilish impossibility. It was nearly twelve when some sudden impulse turned him before he knew it in the direction of Miss Wales's house, and he found himself hurrying

R. J.'S MOTHER

along the street, repeating fiercely the assurance he had given Lily: "Lying nigger—I'll wring his neck for him!"

At Miss Wales's door he rung, then pounded on the panel in a distracted haste that could not wait for the old feet hurrying down the stairs. Swathed in her gray dressing-gown, with the fox terrier barking distractedly beside her, Miss Wales opened the door herself, holding her candle above her head to see who it was.

"*Framely!*" she ejaculated, as the flickering light fell on his face; "what on earth has happened?"

And the young man with set teeth told her what had happened: "That damned mulatto has lied about Lily."

Miss Wales was stricken dumb. Stone, in his angry absorption, pushed past her into the parlor. "Where are the matches?" he said. He fumbled for his own case, scratched a light, broke the match, swore under his breath, and at last got the gas lighted. Then he looked at her. "Well, why don't you say something? Can't you see how horrible it is? Not that it could make any difference to me, it's only the insult to her! But of course there is not a word

A BLACK DROP

of truth in it. Lily says she is perfectly sure she is white. I haven't a particle of anxiety about it. But don't you see how horrible it is?"

"I see," she said. "Oh, my dear boy, I wish I didn't see so much. I'm afraid—I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what? What is there to be afraid of? The only thing I'm afraid of is that I won't get a chance to break his head!"

"I'm afraid—"

His eyes threatened her, and she dared not finish.

"The first thing to do," he said, "is to prove him a liar."

Miss Wales was silent.

"But I don't know how to go to work," he groaned. "Every way seems blocked. If Mrs. Foster would only speak! Or if we knew where she came from! Of course, I'll track her down and find out."

"Why should you?" Miss Wales said. "Why is it necessary to find out—anything?"

"What?" he stammered; "not prove that Lily is white?"

"Do you have to prove it to love her?" the old woman said, her eyes narrowing.

Silence tingled between them, and then, as if

R. J.'S MOTHER

the words were torn from him, he said, in an agonized voice:

"Why, I—I have to prove it to—to—" He stopped, and ended in a gasping whisper: "to marry her."

Miss Wales drew a deep breath. He had said it! "I want to say one or two things to you," she began. . . .

She said them, mercilessly. There were certain traits in Lily—she rehearsed them one after another, her even voice unshaken by his passionate interruptions and denials; there were characteristics of temperament, of physique, of taste even—she did not spare him one of them. "Until I stopped her," said Miss Wales, "she used a sort of heavy perfumery"; then she added three sinister words: "*They all do.*"

She had other things to say, but he would not listen. He stormed at her, insisting that she "take back" everything she had said. In his fury he got up and tramped about the little room. "How can you have such thoughts!—(Miss Wales, if that dog doesn't stop barking, I'll—) *Lily!* As white as her name! I thought you'd see how she has been lied about. My God! What am I going to do?"

What he did do was to stay, storming, and

A BLACK DROP

denying, and affirming that anyhow it didn't make any difference, until almost daylight. When Miss Wales, with one hand gripping her terrier's nose, and pallid with fatigue, let him out into the dawn, he went away without even a good-bye. "Hard hit, my poor Frame," she said to herself, as she toiled stiffly up-stairs for a little nap. And then she thought pityingly of Lily. "Whatever happens, I can see that she is going to be my chore, poor child." . . . "It could make no difference," Stone had said. And Miss Wales, repeating his words, added, as if he could hear her: "My dear, the difference was made before you were born. You are helpless."

He was helpless. . . . Of course, he struggled. Perhaps the straw on the current struggles to go up-stream. Against the imperious surge of instinct, which forbids the higher organism to jeopardize the future, this youth put first love, and then pity, and then his word of honor. But in that terrific current, love, if a man holds to it, drags him down; and nature has nothing in common with pity—that artifice of civilization to retard the fittest! Instinct sweeps past pity as a stream sweeps past the bending grasses on

R. J.'S MOTHER

the shore. Perhaps honor goes under last—even an honor weighted by that false idea of obligation which holds a man to his word to a woman he does not wish to marry; but not even honor can outride the elemental torrent of instinct.

It was a terrible winter for Framely Stone—hurling himself, poor lad, against an unintelligible but irresistible command of nature. His careless youth dropped away from him like a garment of beauty and defence; he grew suddenly old; almost in a night the lines came about his lips and on his forehead. . . . At first he took up the struggle with a high heart; he was confident that proof would be found that Lily was white. By-and-by, as his confidence wavered, he was sure that he would be able to accept uncertainty, for apparently it could never be more than that; if Lily could not be proved white, neither could she be proved black. But it was at this time that a new look came into his face, a look of fear. Would he be able to bear uncertainty? No wonder he looked scared! A man can lose love out of his life, or happiness; but what will become of him if he lose self-respect? If he “threw her over”—he put it to himself as brutally as he could—if he played

A BLACK DROP

the sneak, and asked to be released from his engagement, would he ever look himself in the face again? No wonder Framely Stone was afraid! All that dark Mercer winter he took every possible step to prove what he wanted to prove, and all the while he reassured himself by insisting that, as Augustus had been a criminal, he was presumably a liar. "In prison for three years, for theft; I wouldn't believe any statement of his under oath—against Mrs. Foster's word; she was truthful, wasn't she, Lily?"

And Lily, remembering the "orphum 'sylum," and many other harmless statements, hesitated, and said, why, yes; she supposed so, only, except—sometimes. . . . "But," the poor girl would add, timidly, "what is the use of proving anything, Framely? What difference does it make? It won't make my skin any whiter or any darker. Oh, I am just the same girl! And I know I am white. Mammy said so."

And Stone, groaning to himself, would say: "Yes, of course, of course. But I want to show up this scoundrel Augustus. Oh—if Mrs. Foster could only speak! Perhaps she will, soon?"

Instead of speaking, Mammy sank into the

R. J.'S MOTHER

eternal silence. She died in April, without a word or look to answer the tragic question. The funeral was in the morning, so, of course, Miss Wales could not be present, but it was understood that, when the service was over, Framely was to bring poor Lily to her. "She is to stay here, Frame," Miss Wales told him, "until—"

"Yes; until—" Stone said.

He went alone, in all the decorum of a frock-coat and silk hat, to the little house on Baker Street. There was a chattering group about the front door-steps, and the darkened parlor was crowded to suffocation with musky, vociferating grief; some pungent perfumery, mixing with the smell of cheap crape, drowned the faint sweetness of Framely's wreath of violets. Augustus, in deep mourning, the whites of his eyes gleaning opalescently in the gloom, was a grotesquely solemn master of ceremonies; with a black-gloved hand, he waved Framely to a chair close to the big varnished and glittering coffin. As he passed it, the young man gave a shrinking look—and when his eyes rested upon the gray face on the white satin pillow, something seemed to grip his heart in his breast—grip it, and squeeze the blood out of it, and let

A BLACK DROP

it drop. The sharp refinement of death had chiselled the features into new lines. . . . Framely was dizzy as he sat down by Lily, and his face, in the blackness about them, was as ghastly white as hers. He held himself in rigid control during the service, never raising his eyes from the floor; once the cadenced moaning of the pleased and excited mourners broke into an audible "Oh, Lawd! Amen, dear Jesus! Sweet Jesus!"—and at that he shivered; there was something elemental in the sound, it came from dim and primeval recesses; it frightened the white creature, who was a little further from those abysmal depths from which he, as well as they, had sprung. Stone shivered, but he did not lift his eyes.

It was that night, after the funeral, that his last clutch for honor missed. . . . He had "bucked the universe," poor boy! and he was in the dust. "I can't," he said to himself. "I can't—I can't." . . .

He looked years older when he went to ask her to release him. If the girl's happiness had been torn from her because of that effort to go against the stream, the man's self-respect had been whirled away, too. "I can't, Lily. You don't loathe me as I loathe myself. But—I

R. J.'S MOTHER

can't. I can't face the—the uncertainty, even. I don't ask you to forgive me. I am not worthy of forgiveness. And yet, Lily—Lily, I am helpless.”

“I know I am white,” she said, pitifully; “but even if I wasn't, I am just the same girl.”

“I am not the same man,” he said, harshly. “That's all there is to it. Lily—I don't understand it; only—*it's bigger than I am*. I fought it, and it downed me. That's all I can say. It's bigger than I am.”

He buried his face in his hands for a minute, and then he looked up. “And I suppose,” he said, miserably, “that you will never believe that I love you?”

Lily half smiled; then she sighed and shook her head. “No,” she said; “of co's' I can never believe that.”

THE WHITE FEATHER

THE WHITE FEATHER

I

RICHARD PHILLIPS sat at his work-table, staring blankly at the letter lying open on the writing-pad. The pounding in his ears, and the curious, muffled feeling in his throat were subsiding; but he was still conscious of his body—of a tingling in his hands, and a sense of weakness about his knees.

“I’m not surprised,” he said; “of course I’m not surprised.”

Then, in the midst of the surprise which he denied, a surprise of body as well as soul, he was aware of a small surprise at hearing his own voice. For he had spoken his thought aloud. He picked up the letter again, and, to his annoyance, saw that his hand was not steady. Holmes had said that the book bore the traces of a fatigued body; well, here was evidence of that fatigue—his hand was un-

R. J.'S MOTHER

steady. His nerves were playing a preposterous trick upon him; they were making him act like an hysterical school-girl! The mortification of it made his hand shake all the more. With a faint laugh he put the letter back on the table, and thrust his hands into his pockets. Then he drew a long breath and looked about the darkening room as though to find something to distract his thought. It was not a winning room, but it was not bad—as rooms in flats go. It was small, and looked out on the well-way; on a bright day Phillips could see shadows of blowing steam from an escape-pipe on the roof chasing down the blank white wall opposite the window. In the early morning the sun pointed a thin finger into this well-way and touched Phillips's inkstand, striking a fleeting glitter from the silver top. There were other silver things on his table—Agnes presented him with some new and useless “furnishing” every Christmas; but the litter of letters and old proof-sheets and stray pages of manuscript hid them. It was a most untidy work-table—more or less dusty, and of a confusion that would have been distracting to anybody but the owner, who maintained, against his women-kind, that the “arrangement” of his papers was

THE WHITE FEATHER

the most convenient that could be devised. The walls of the room were lined with books; on chairs or on the floor piles of pamphlets and magazines grew into dusty towers, a little taller and more toppling each month. There was an ill-smelling collection of pipes on the mantel-piece; and Richard insisted, for reasons best known to himself, on keeping various shoes and slippers in a corner behind the letter-press.

"It's perfectly disgraceful!" Agnes Phillips used to sigh. "He will not have a thing done to that dreadful study of his! I offered to dust it myself, so that Sarah shouldn't mix his papers up; but he won't let me touch it."

"My dear," her husband would say, with his whimsical smile, "your part of the flat is immaculate--do be content; only man is vile."

"But you like it," she protested, with displeasure.

And as it was the only spot in the house where this mild creature, with keen, gentle brown eyes, felt himself absolute master, he would reply, with distinct satisfaction in his tone, "Yes, I do like it." And Agnes, who, when she was not displeased or worried about anything, had a pretty wit of her own, would say that she believed he gloried in his shame.

R. J.'S MOTHER

But, in spite of confusion and dust, it was not an entirely bad little room, because on bright days there were the blowing shadows on the white wall, and on dull days there was an open fire, chuckling and winking behind the rusty iron dogs. This afternoon, however, there was no sunshine, and the fire had gone out; a log had burned through in the middle, broken, and fallen apart in two charred points. It was growing dark now, in the early winter dusk; and the dead ashes, the confusion of papers, the dusty mantel-piece, and pipes and pamphlets brought a certain bleakness into the room that fell cold upon the man's heart, where already the substance of that letter on his desk lay like a weight. And yet, for sound, warm, honest friendship the letter was like the clasp of a hand—a surgeon's hand, perhaps, just before he begins his dreadful and beneficent work. For there was surgery in that letter, which bore the imprint of the editorial rooms of a periodical of serious distinction in literature. . . .

DEAR PHILLIPS [it began],—I have read the MS. with most anxious concern. I have been counting on it, as you know, for my next serial, and your hint of your own dissatisfaction with it caused me a little uneasiness, for I think you are the only man I know

THE WHITE FEATHER

whose opinion of his own work has really critical value. When I finished it I was compelled to believe that your judgment was correct. *The White Feather* is not up to your own standard—a standard, my dear fellow, which, as you very well know, ranks you as among the first men of letters in this country. *The White Feather* bears (as you said you feared) the marks of the physical strain of these last two years: the work is *sick* work; the work of a man staggering from a physical experience which has not yet transmuted itself (as it will) into a spiritual one. In this temporary condition it is obvious that *The White Feather* has been written. When I say that we must not use it for our serial next year, I speak as much for your sake as for our own. You cannot afford, my dear Phillips, to put mediocre work on the market. Your most valuable asset is the absolute integrity of your artistic sense. I don't know that it will mean much to you, but I can't help telling you that you are the only literary man of whom (in my opinion) that can be said to-day. In these times of century runs, so to speak,—of panting advertising efforts for popularity,—your work stands out from the vulgar herd of books as a star above a fog-bank. (Now, for a poor hack of an editor, I think that's rather a fine phrase.) Of course your next book will find you on your legs, and I do hope it will be possible for us to avail ourselves of it. Pray let me know what it is to be about, and when I may hope to see it.

Then followed one or two commonplaces about some mutual friends, and the hope that Mrs. Phillips and Rosamond were well, and the

R. J.'S MOTHER

assurance that the writer was his old friend and admirer.

But when Richard Phillips read this letter he felt the blood buzz in his ears. He had known that the work was not up to his own mark; Agnes knew it, too, and said so, candidly. And yet he had taken it for granted that Holmes would want it. Possibly because he had never since his salad days—never, at least, since he had seriously entered the profession of letters—had any work “rejected.” He had come to think of his writing as a merchant thinks of the commodity he has to sell: as a staple—as so much sugar or cotton. Prices might fluctuate, of course; but sugar and cotton always sell. So with his work. For twenty years it had had a market value. To sell a manuscript was a matter of course; the only element of uncertainty in the transaction was the price; better or worse, as the case might be. When he wrote Holmes that he was not quite satisfied with *The White Feather*, the idea of its not being published never occurred to him. And just now he was in rather more of a hurry to publish than usual. His long illness of two years ago had been a strain upon his resources, in that it had meant nearly a year of unpro-

THE WHITE FEATHER

ductiveness. He had, to be sure, a little income from his savings, but his capital was very small, for the Phillipses were of those easy folk who live, with perfect placidity, up to the limit of an income produced by labor; for them the rainy day was always too far off to make it seem worth while, in fair weather, to raise clouds of economy. But Richard always finished a novel every eighteen months or so, and that meant the sale of serial rights for a comfortable sum; and the book sales were satisfactory, though never phenomenal. He had very much more than a *succès d'estime*, but he did not belong to the period of million-copy sales. However, he earned enough, taken in connection with stray articles and one or two short stories (which always pay well), and with that small and pleasant sum from his investments, to get along very well. People thought him much richer than he was; but certainly he managed to live in the kind of flat Agnes liked; and they were able to give Rosamond a "coming out" tea; and Agnes dressed the girl charmingly—and all this on a sum that is large or small according to which side of it you place your own income. But Phillips's long illness had hampered them a little; and the writing of *The White Feather*

R. J.'S MOTHER

had been a *tour de force* to meet the exigencies of the situation. As he sat there in the little darkening room, staring at the dull white of the opposite wall, he said this to himself, as an explanation and excuse. But as he said it, it seemed as if something cool spread over his whole body—a wave of fear; for the book was as good as he could make it! He had written hurriedly, to be sure, and under pressure; but he had never scamped his work or been slipshod about it. He had done his best: that was the desperate truth. What was lacking was—What was it? Had sickness touched him so that virtue had gone out of him? Was some spring cut? The mechanism, technically excellent, was motionless; there were words, and words, and words; but the divine voice of human experience and passion was silent. Yet he had done his best! He knew it; and that was why his soul sickened within him.

Agnes had hurried him a little towards the end, for she was a practical creature. "We should have to move if it were not for *The White Feather*," she used to say, with a sigh of comfortable assurance that they would not move. Once, before the story was quite done, she suggested that he should ask his pub-

THE WHITE FEATHER

lishers for an advance. "People do that," she said.

"I don't," Richard said, mildly.

But there was no manner of doubt in Agnes's mind of the ultimate sale of the book. "Only, you ought to get five times as much as you do," she declared. "They say that woman who wrote *The Isle of Dragons* made forty thousand dollars."

"But, my dear, I couldn't write an *Isle of Dragons*," Richard said, with a droll look.

"I don't suppose you could," she admitted, regretfully. But she was proud of his work, or, rather, of his reputation. She kept all the newspaper clippings about his books or himself; and it was she who supplied his publishers with photographs of "Phillips at work in his library," "Phillips on his yacht" (which was a pleasant old tub of a cat-boat), "The apartment-house where Richard Phillips, the distinguished author, spends his winters." Time was when these things had made Phillips wince; then he had got used to them, and after awhile forgotten them. But he was aware that Agnes took notoriety very seriously; to her it meant fame. Of his laborious pages, of the dignity and humanity and sweetness of his delicate in-

R. J.'S MOTHER

sight which set him among the elect, she was affectionately ignorant; but she was absolutely sure of his literary rating.

"How am I going to tell her?" he asked himself, blankly, looking at that letter on his blotting-pad. The room had grown so dark that he could not read it; but he knew just where, at the top of the third page, Holmes had written in his small, precise hand: "When I say that we must not use it—"

"Good God!" Phillips said, under his breath, "I'm a back number!"

II

THE telling Agnes was a bad moment. Her astonishment and unbelief and anger were very bad. He told her, with an attempt to be casual, when she came into the study to say good-night. Rosamond had come before her, and, balanced on the arm of her father's chair, kissed the thin hair on the top of his head, and told him about her work that day in the life class at the academy.

"It wasn't good, daddy, and I felt pretty discouraged."

"It will be better to-morrow, Rose of the World," he said.

THE WHITE FEATHER

"Yes, it shall be better to-morrow," she agreed, cheerfully.

Phillips looked at the end of his cigar, his eyes narrowing. Would his work be better to-morrow? Probably not. "I did my best—my *best*," he said to himself again, with that sick sinking of the heart. If only he could have reproached himself for carelessness; but no, he had done his best. And it was bad.

When Rosamond went off to bed, Agnes came in; and after he had listened to her complaints about the janitor and the outrageous coldness of the flat—"They are just simply robbers, the way they keep the steam-heat down," she declared—Phillips absently turned his cheek for her good-night kiss and took up his pen. Then, as if it were an afterthought:

"Oh, by-the-way, Holmes doesn't want *The White Feather*."

"Doesn't *want*—*The White Feather*?" She was shrill in her astonishment.

"Well, it's rather below par, I think myself," he said, with elaborate carelessness.

"But, Dick, he told you he wanted it. He's got to take it!"

"No, he didn't. Holmes is too canny to buy

R. J.'S MOTHER

a pig in a poke. He said he 'hoped he could have it.' That's a different story."

"And he doesn't want it? He's crazy," she said.

Phillips put his pen down and turned around in his creaking swivel-chair. "You are very flattering, my dear; but the honest truth is, it isn't good. Holmes would be a poor editor if he couldn't see that, and a poor friend if he didn't tell me so."

"It's good enough," his wife said, decidedly; she sat down in front of the fire, and turned her skirt back over her knees so that it should not be scorched; her honest, round face, usually rosy and contented, was a little pale, and her sensible gray eyes, behind her gold-rimmed glasses, were distinctly angry. The fact was, any delay in the sale of the manuscript was an inconvenience. "It's good *enough*," she said; "I don't know what that man Holmes wants! I believe he's jealous. He simply is a disappointed man himself; he couldn't write a popular book to save his life, and so he took to editing a magazine—a sort of hanging on to the skirts of literature. I never did like him. Not want *The White Feather*? I tell you, he's perfectly crazy! He couldn't write a book like that

THE WHITE FEATHER

to save his life — or *The Isle of Dragons*, either.”

Richard laughed out loud. How Holmes would appreciate that! If only some other woman had said it, so that he could, with decency, repeat it! “No,” he said, “no, my dear; I’m inclined to think Holmes could not have written *The Isle of Dragons*.”

“Well,” Agnes said, abruptly, “what are you going to do about it?”

Phillips was silent.

“It’s very annoying to have Mr. Holmes act this way,” she said. “But of course it doesn’t make any real difference; the only bothering thing is the delay. Of course you will place the story somewhere, right off. Any of the big magazines will jump at it. And I don’t know, Dick, but what, on the whole, it will be better for you. Mr. Holmes’s silly old magazine has fallen off dreadfully of late. He never has any timely articles on liquid air and things; he’s ’way behind the times. Do you know, I shouldn’t wonder a bit if the whole thing simply means that they are in a bad way financially and can’t afford to pay your price, and this is their way of getting out of it.”

Phillips laughed drearily. “I think our

R. J.'S MOTHER

butcher and baker and candlestick-maker would be satisfied with their credit, Agnes, if not with ours. Oh yes; I'll write *The Caravel* about *The White Feather* to-morrow, and ask if they want it. But--it's pretty poor stuff, Agnes. That's where the shoe pinches. Bad work! Bad work!"

"Oh, nonsense, Richard! Mr. Holmes's letter has got on your nerves. It isn't anything of the kind. Perhaps it isn't the very best thing you've ever done, but I don't know why you should expect to be always up to concert-pitch. Nobody ever is; and it's good enough. You will see that the other magazines won't be so particular."

He winced. "That's just it," he said, moodily.

"Now, Dick, you really are absurd. Come! Go to bed; you will be more sensible in the morning." She got up, anxious to cheer him, but a little impatient, too. "You mustn't be foolish, Richard," she said, decidedly.

He slowly turned down the student's lamp on the writing-table, and then blew it out. She heard him sigh. "I wish I didn't have to publish it at all," he said. At that his wife was genuinely disturbed.

"I believe you're not well, Richard. Have

THE WHITE FEATHER

you taken cold? You've just got to stop wearing those low shoes in December. And I'll tell you what—you've got to take some quinine. I know you've taken cold."

"Oh, I don't want any quinine," he said, wearily.

But Agnes was firm. "Yes, you do. I'm perfectly certain you've taken cold."

"Oh, really, my dear," he protested, "I would rather—"

"My dear, it isn't a question of what you'd rather do," Agnes interrupted, reprovingly. And when they went to their room she counted out eight grains, which Richard, faintly amused, swallowed for the sake of peace.

III

THE next morning things did look brighter. Perhaps it was the quinine; perhaps it was the beautiful, endless drift of blowing shadows on the opposite white wall; perhaps it was Rosamond's quick-hearted courage about his book. Her mother had told her of Mr. Holmes's letter before Richard came in to breakfast; and afterwards she slipped into the study and gave him a quick squeeze and hurried kiss.

R. J.'S MOTHER

"I'm late and I've got to tear; but I know just how you feel, daddy. And the next book, I do believe, will be the finest thing you ever did in all your born days, because, you old stupid, darling father, what have you told me sixty times about my silly drawing? '*When you can see it is bad, you can make it better. It's when it seems perfect that you are lost.*' What is sauce for the goose, sir—"

"Well, the goose is saucy enough, anyhow," he retorted, laughing. "Come, clear out, Good-for-nothing!"

When she had left him, he did feel the comfort of knowing that his dissatisfaction was his salvation. He knew *The White Feather* was poor work. But there was a deeper depth, which, thank Heaven! he had not reached—the depth of not knowing it was poor; the deepest deep, of thinking it was good. No; his critical faculty was unimpaired; therein, he said to himself, was his hope; therein, also, was his agony.

For, taking the manuscript up that morning, with a view to seeing how he could improve it, he saw that it could not be improved. It was a body of death. By a trick of style it was galvanized, now and then, and made the gestures of life. But it was dead. The situation

THE WHITE FEATHER

was not one which labor could remedy. One may toil endlessly to polish a pine board. Richard Phillips had seen color and texture and noble grain come to the surface under his careful, polishing hand too often not to realize that time would be wasted here. He groaned under his breath after awhile and threw the thing down on the table. "No use," he said to himself; "no use." He put the manuscript away, as if anxious to get it out of his sight, and called to his wife that he was going out to walk. But she delayed him a moment to remind him of a tea to which he must take Rosamond that afternoon.

"I can't go," she said. "I have a cold, and I won't go out in this horrid weather; though I'm sure I might as well go out as live in this barn. Those steam-heaters are like ice."

"We might use them for refrigerators," he said, whimsically. "Agnes, I think I won't go to the tea. Rosy won't mind going by herself."

"I mind for her," Agnes said, with decision. "And, anyway, Richard, you really ought to go. It's good for your books; you must be seen about, you know; especially now."

"Why now?" he said; and wished he had not

R. J.'S MOTHER

said it. He knew why, even before her explanation.

"Oh well, its a good while since you've published a book; and people forget so; and new people come up, you know. That *Dragon* woman—everybody is talking about her book. Yes; you ought to be seen, now."

"But I loathe teas, Agnes," he said, wearily; "they are of the devil."

"Now, don't be foolish, Dick," she said, impatiently. "What difference does it make whether you enjoy them or not? Enjoyment isn't everything, my dear. You want to sell your books, don't you? You go to one of these things, and people see you and talk about you; and then your books sell. Rosamond will meet you there at five. And do stay a little while, Dick; don't dart out the minute you have said 'How do you do?'—I know you," she ended, laughing.

"Well," he said, helplessly, "tell Rosamond I'll be there at five." Then he went out to take his walk. The fresh air, and later the flattery of some deference from a stranger whom he met at the tea, brought a certain rebound of hope; in fact, his spirits had sunk so low that a rebound was inevitable, and he began to argue

THE WHITE FEATHER

to himself that he could not be a good judge of his own work. As for Holmes—he winced; well, he had, perhaps, unconsciously prejudiced Holmes just a little. The work was not his best; of course he knew that. But it was not—not so very bad. Anyhow, it was only fair to himself to get another opinion. He would try some other magazine.

“And I’ll abide by their judgment,” he told himself. “If they don’t want it—” But imagination turned sick at that.

He went home and wrote his letter. Did Messrs. So-and-so care to consider a novel of his, just finished, for serial publication in 18—, etc. The reply was prompt and flattering: Messrs. So-and-so would be extremely glad to see the manuscript of Mr. Phillips’s new novel; and they begged to assure him that they greatly appreciated his courtesy in writing them. They would send an immediate reply.

“What did I tell you?” cried Agnes, triumphantly.

“My dear,” he said, “don’t count your chickens—”

But his wife laughed. “Dick, you really are a great goose. You haven’t had a thing refused in twenty years, and here you are as scared

R. J.'S MOTHER

as a school-girl who sends her first poem to an editor. Did you tie your manuscript up in pink ribbons? That is what the school-girl does."

But Phillips would not be cheered; he had sunk back into the melancholy of his own judgment. "Very likely they'll take it," he admitted; "but the sale of a work of art does not imply its worth."

At which Agnes lost her patience a little. "My dear, there's too much talk about art. I prefer common-sense and a bank-account. Don't you, Rosy?"

Rosamond laughed and said that, fortunately, Daddy was able to combine all these important things.

"Well, to come back to earth," Agnes said, good-naturedly, "Richard, you must go downstairs and blow the clerk up. I rang for the elevator five times—*five* times, if you please—before that wretched Charley saw fit to come up. He was loafing down in the cellar with the engineer. I won't stand it. It's perfectly outrageous. And he treats us so only because we're on the top floor and he thinks we're not important tenants. I want you to go down and just make a fuss. I've talked till I'm tired."

THE WHITE FEATHER

"Oh, I guess it won't happen again," Phillips said, vaguely.

"No; because we will make a row. Now go, dear, right off."

"I—don't believe its necessary," he said, hesitating. "I guess it will be all right."

"Richard, that is very wrong in you," she told him, seriously. "It's just the American man all over. He refuses to kick, and everything goes wrong. You ought to have more sense of responsibility. Now, do go—and just make things unpleasant for that horrid boy."

"But, Agnes, really, I—I'd rather not; I—"

"Oh, Dick, now don't be silly! You are so weak-minded in such things. I can't understand it; I never have the least difficulty in finding fault. And, really, I must say, considering the annoyance to me of that boy's impertinence, you ought to put a stop to it. Rosamond rang three times yesterday before he came up."

Phillips sighed. "Well," he said, "I'll go." He got up, but he made two or three pottering excuses before he wandered down to the entrance-hall. There, leaning on the counter, fingering a magazine, he told the clerk that it

R. J.'S MOTHER

was a cold day; then he gave him a cigar, and observed that Charley was a nice boy.

"We keep him busy, don't we?" he said. "Sometimes he seems rather long getting up to our cockloft."

The clerk laughed, and said that was a new name for the top floor; and Richard, looking over his shoulder at young Charles, slumbering for the moment on the plush cushions of his cage, said that if Mercury would please come to life, he would like to go up-stairs; "and look here, young man," he reproached him, "don't you think this machine is rather slow in getting up to my floor?" He accompanied the reproach with half a dollar; upon which Charles yawned affectionately, and admitted that the elevator was kind a' slow; "everything in this old shack is a back number," Charles complained. Phillips, stepping out into the tiny dark hall, cringed at those two words. He said them over to himself as he sneaked into his writing-room, avoiding the parlor for fear Agnes would want a report of the row. When she did ask for it, at dinner, her wrath had cooled, and he was able to leave it to her imagination after a word or two to the effect that he "guessed Charley would do better now."

THE WHITE FEATHER

“That’s good,” Agnes said, approvingly; “a good blowing-up once in a while makes things better.” Then she looked at him solicitously, and said he was pale. “You are worrying about *The White Feather*,” she said; “it will be all right, dear. Now, don’t think of it.”

“Oh yes, it will be all right,” he agreed, quickly. He did not want to talk about it. He was still sore from the shock of Holmes’s letter, and he preferred to forget *The White Feather* until he heard from the editor to whom he had sent it—which, indeed, he was long in doing. Nearly a month passed before a reply came. Richard was not used to such delay, and it fretted him; once he had a sudden cold perspiration of fear that the answer would be a rejection. But that was at night—at midnight, in fact—when he was lying awake thinking of the story.

“If McDonald has any literary sense, he *will* decline it,” he said, heavily, to himself.

And the very next day McDonald’s literary sense was displayed. He was very sorry, but he felt that just at present it was undesirable to publish a serial on the lines of *The White Feather*. The book was most charming (as was all of Mr. Phillips’s work), and he was very

R. J.'S MOTHER

greatly obliged to him for permitting him to see the manuscript; but he had hoped that the work was on Mr. Phillips's usual lines, in which case he would have been exceedingly glad to publish it; as it was, he feared he must decline, though with very great regret. He hoped Mr. Phillips would permit him to consider his next novel, and he was, sincerely, Mr. Phillips's "obt. servt."

Richard Phillips put the letter back into the envelope and handed it to his wife, in silence. While she read it he stood at the window with his back to her, watching the blowing shadows on the opposite wall. He heard her pull the typewritten sheet out of the envelope and unfold it. Then he heard a quick, indrawn breath.

"McDonald shows his sense," he said.

"He's crazy," Agnes said.

He turned and looked at her pityingly. Her pride was hard hit, and he was sorry for her. He felt dully indifferent himself. McDonald had shown his sense.

"I have a higher opinion of that young man than I had," he said, listlessly. But he was sorry for Agnes.

"Well, all is, we'll try So-and-so," she said,

THE WHITE FEATHER

violently. "I believe it's Mr. Holmes's fault; he has told McDonald, and McDonald—"

"Now, Agnes, you know Holmes wouldn't do that. My dear, it's poor work, that's the amount of it. And Holmes sees it, and McDonald sees it, and you see it, and I see it. What's the use of bothering with it?"

"Use?" she said, hysterically. "In the first place, I *hate* them for daring to criticise you."

Richard laughed and came and put his hand on her shoulder kindly; it was like the old days—days not more loving, perhaps, but more expressive.

"Who will take it?" she said, after a pause.

"The Lord knows. If I were an editor, I wouldn't."

"Oh," she said, sharply, "how can you be so foolish? You know your name would sell it, even if it were—twice as poor."

"I have never knowingly sold a gold brick, Agnes."

She did not answer, for she hardly heard him; she was frowning nervously, evidently trying to make up her mind. "Where shall we send it next?"

"I'm not going to send it anywhere."

"Richard!"

R. J.'S MOTHER

Then he tried to explain.

"To take money for poor stuff is dishonest."

"If a magazine wants poor stuff, that's not your business!"

"Isn't it?" he said, gently.

"Anyway, it's not poor stuff."

"Yes, it is," Phillips said, "and I'm not going to print it at all. I don't think any magazine of standing would take it. Of course, I could publish it at once in book form; but I won't."

"Oh, book form!" she said. "That doesn't pay nearly as well."

"That's not the point," he said. "I don't want to sell—trash."

She looked at him blankly. For a curious minute the man and the woman, face to face in the grimy, cluttered little room, stared at each other like two strangers. Then she began to protest, violently. At that he turned away, wincing, with a cringing, sidewise look, even with a faint snarl—like a dog who would not be parted from his bone.

"I won't publish it in any form. We are not really hard up; we are not in debt. If we were in debt, why, perhaps—well, I might exchange one kind of honesty for another. But you

THE WHITE FEATHER

needn't worry. I'll earn the money. I can go into an office and do clerical work; I know fellows that would give me a job. We may have to retrench a little, but I can earn the money. I will do any decent work you want me to; but I won't publish *The White Feather*."

His tall, thin figure wavered as he spoke, and his hands opened and shut nervously. Had Agnes had the presence of mind to strike some quick blow, had she burst into tears, he might, perhaps, through mere physical weakness, have surrendered. But she was not the crying kind. She grew white, and dared not trust herself to speak for a minute, then she said:

"I hope you will see this more reasonably in the morning, Richard," and left him in his dark little room, before the dreary disorder of his work-table.

For several days the Phillipses were very wretched. Richard shut himself up in the study from morning until night. He told Rosamond that he had begun a new book.

"It will take him a year to write it," Agnes said, with a frightened look. "What shall we do?"

"Move," Rosamond said, gayly.

"I'll never consent to it," her mother de-

R. J.'S MOTHER

clared, her round, anxious face reddening slowly with anger. "We are just settled here, and we are going to stay. If your father would only push about, he could place *The White Feather*. But he won't."

Rosamond looked grave. "I don't see how he can push about. If it isn't father's best work (and maybe it isn't), *ought* he to publish it? It might be bad for his reputation."

"He cares more for his reputation than he does for us!"

"Oh, mother, you know he doesn't."

"Well," Mrs. Phillips amended, moodily, "I sometimes think he cares more for what he calls his *art* than he does for us."

Rosamond was silent.

They did not move, after all. Agnes was so bitterly opposed to it that, instead, she ventured the extravagance of experimenting with various economies. For a time their table was distinctly less good, and she dismissed the second servant, and mentioned the fact daily to her husband. As for Phillips, he set himself heart and soul upon his new book.

It was about this time that they had news of the mine in which Richard had rashly (and most characteristically) invested nearly two-

THE WHITE FEATHER

thirds of his savings; a dividend was to be passed. Agnes grew keenly anxious. She hurried her husband a good deal on the new story, for they were getting a little straitened. Occasionally she harked back to *The White Feather*, and fretted because he did not bring it out in book form; and sometimes she burst out that if he would only push about he could get one of the magazines to take it. Indeed, secretly, she offered it to one periodical, only to have it returned—returned, too, with a comment which made her pale with rage. She never told Richard of this experience, but she ceased to prod him about the magazines.

“You could bring it out in book form, but you won’t,” she would say over and over.

“No, I won’t,” he would answer, doggedly.

Then she would begin to argue. This was terrible to Richard. For twenty years it had been his gently indolent habit to buy his peace by yielding; and now, suddenly, he found himself bankrupt of the price of peace—he could not yield. And peace passed him by. In the struggle between the husband and wife, Agnes’s rosy, sensible face aged perceptibly; and as for Phillips, his very soul panted with the deadly wrestling—wrestling with long-atrophied spirit-

R. J.'S MOTHER

ual muscle. During their arguments (in which, indeed, too often they could not speak the same language) Agnes generally seemed to get the better of him. She, somehow, always drove him into a final corner, where, at bay, his back to the wall, he could only make a frantic declaration of artistic honesty. When this point was reached he would repeat, dully, "Well, I won't do it—so there!" When a mild, sweet-natured man gets to the point of saying to his wife passionately, "*so there!*" things are in a bad way. Richard would follow this dogged assertion by flight to his study and a vicious snapping of the bolt.

Then, one day, something happened. The letter came in the morning mail with a sheaf of bills, and Agnes, frowning, gathered them up to open when she was by herself. The imprint on the upper left-hand corner of the envelope did not move her to any attention, as she took it for granted that it was the usual circular or leaflet; she opened it idly and rather by chance. But the engraved letter-heading caught her eye, and gave her a shock of interest. She read breathlessly, turning a little pale, and at the end suddenly burst out crying. She ran with it to Richard's study, and, dropping down

THE WHITE FEATHER

on her knees beside his chair, put her arm around him, half sobbing and half laughing.

"There! What did I tell you? Seven thousand dollars for entire rights!"

"What?" Phillips said, with a dazed look, putting down his pen and coming out of his dream-world. "What?" He took his glasses off, and blinked and rubbed his hand across his eyes as if he were waking up.

"Look! Read that!" she said, putting the letter down on the sheet of yellow manuscript paper on which he was at work, and smoothing it out with a trembling hand. Richard fumbled for his glasses and put them on again. The letter was brief and to the point:

"DEAR SIR,—We are informed that you have lately finished a novel. We should be glad to purchase book and serial rights for the sum of \$7000.

"Yours truly,

"_____"

"Oh, Dick," Agnes said, "what a relief it is! Oh, I—I can hardly believe it! Just think! I thought it was a circular or something, and almost threw it into the waste-basket."

The bitterness and misunderstanding which lay between them like some dull and heavy

R. J.'S MOTHER

fog seemed suddenly to clear and roll away; her ruddy, resolute face, in its relief and pride, was full of the kindness of all their married life.

“But, Agnes,” he said, “Agnes—”

“Will you take it to their office this afternoon? Or would you rather send a messenger? Perhaps it is more dignified to send a messenger.”

“Agnes,” he said, “don’t you see these people simply want my name?”

“Your name? Well, I suppose they do. I should think they would! It will make them seem a little more respectable.”

“And how will it make me seem?” He took his glasses off again and looked at her steadily.

“*Richard!*”

“Why, Agnes, what difference does this offer make? We’ve gone all over it. This doesn’t alter things. Don’t you see? It doesn’t make any difference.”

“Do you mean—is it possible you dream—when we need—Richard, you are insane. It’s just what I said: you value your *name*, as you call it, more than—than Rosamond and me!” The fog shut down again; she drew away from him in a sort of cold horror. “You have no



“‘AGNES, I CAN'T HELP IT,’ HE SAID, PASSIONATELY. ‘OH, IF YOU COULD ONLY UNDERSTAND!’”

THE WHITE FEATHER

excuse now for not publishing it. If anybody wants it, that is their business."

"My business is to sell straight goods," he said, trying to smile.

But her face was hard.

"To refuse to take money when we need money is wicked. It is like throwing it away; it's like burning it up. And it is cruel to Rosamond. I don't say anything about myself—that wouldn't influence you."

"Agnes, I can't help it," he said, passionately. "Oh, if you could only understand!" He dropped his face in his hands; she felt him shiver.

She rose from her knees beside him and stood by the table; once her lips parted to speak, then she set them hard together, and a moment later, without a word, left him.

Alone, in the exhaustion of his soul, he dropped his head on his arms on the desk and sat quite motionless for a long time. Then it came over him, with a sudden terror, that she might come back. He had not the strength for another struggle. So, trembling with haste, he got up and went stealthily into the little entry, fumbling about on the settle in the half-darkness for his coat and hat; finding them, he noiselessly let himself out on to the landing.

R. J.'S MOTHER

There was a minute's wait for the elevator, and it came into his mind that he wished he had blown Charley up for his slowness. He looked over his shoulder once or twice, nervously, but no one called after him; and in the gilded and mirrored cage he dropped swiftly down to the entrance, whose magnificence was the sign of the grandeur and fashion of the building, which meant so much to Agnes. On the outer steps, in the darkening afternoon, the drizzle of fine rain came like a cool hand upon his hot face. He drew a great breath of relief; and then, forgetting to put up his umbrella, he stepped out onto the wet pavement into the hurrying crowd. Drifting with it, a momentary calm of great fatigue fell upon him. Once or twice he panted a little, as if he had run a long distance and was pausing for strength before entering the race again—for, indeed, the goal was not reached. Would it ever be reached? With that offer open, would Agnes ever give up? A black stream of bobbing umbrellas jostling and poking one another, pushed him to the edge of the crowd, and he found himself standing before a brilliant shop-window, staring in at the array of color and electric lights and Christmas holly.

THE WHITE FEATHER

"I will not publish it," he said to himself. . . .
"*She will make me,*" something else said, in the back of his mind.

Then he began his aimless walk again, carried along with the crowd, brushed sometimes by an eddy into a doorway or round a corner; hustled a little, and turned about occasionally; looking absently into the brightly lighted windows, or watching the sudden, sizzling flare of the arc-lamps far up in the rainy darkness overhead. The long lines of the street-lights, gleaming and glittering on the wet pavement, gave him a certain faint pleasure, and the pounding of the horses' feet on the slippery asphalt seemed to fall into a curious rhythm, so that he found himself keeping time with *Quadrupedante putrem sonitu*. . . . The mist had thickened into rain, and he was suddenly aware that his coat was very wet; he put up his umbrella in a shamefaced way, for he thought he must have looked like a crazy man, standing about with a closed umbrella. With this bit of common-sense, courage began to stir.

"I will not do it," he said again; but still there was the whisper underneath: "*She will make me.*"

He began to drift with the crowd: up one

R. J.'S MOTHER

side of the street, back on the other side; a dozen blocks down; across; slowly back again to the square. Then he noticed that it was growing colder; the rain was changing into snow—wet, heavy flakes that could not be shaken off. He stopped under an electric light and held out his arm to let them fall upon his sleeve. He stood there a full minute, forgetful of the surge of human life, looking in absorbed joy at those exquisite hexagonals of purity and law; he even, in the bliss of watching this vanishing beauty, forgot Agnes's face. But that was only for an instant; her set lips and sensible eyes, hard and determined, behind her glasses, came into his mind like a blow. The dazzle of the street-lamps had softened into a whirl of white, and he shivered, realizing that he was very damp and chilly; but still he stood there, under the great arc-lamp that set vast shadows seesawing across the crowding clamor of the square, and watched the big flakes settle on his sleeve.

"I will *not*," he was saying to himself; and—"*She will make me*," came, over and over, the terrified answer.

By-and-by, automatically, he began to drift again, and this time the misery of the wet cold

THE WHITE FEATHER

pushed him towards the vast and foolish façade of his hotel. But when he reached it he turned and walked the length of the block and back; and as he walked he suddenly paused, and, standing stock-still, laughed aloud. A man, passing, looked at him curiously through the snow, and Phillips, realizing what he had done, laughed again under his breath. The panic had gone out of his face; but it left tragedy behind it.

When he finally entered his hotel and crept into the elevator, Charley was plainly displeased with him.

"That there umbrella of yours is soakin' wet," he said, looking disgustedly at the puddle on the floor.

Phillips looked at it, too, and smiled vaguely.

"So it is," he said.

He let himself into the flat with his pass-key as furtively as he had gone out; and he opened and shut his study door without noise. The room was quite dark, except for a wink of fire on the hearth. He did not stop to take off his wet coat and hat, but went hurriedly to the drawer into which *The White Feather* had been thrust after its last fruitless journey. He felt about in the darkness until his hand

R. J.'S MOTHER

touched the manuscript. Then he crouched down on his heels in front of the fire, and thrust some paper and a stick of pitch-pine against the spark that was flickering under the half-burned log; he fumbled about for the bellows and blew softly until the spark winked and widened and died down; then the paper caught, and there was a sudden flame and a little roar. In a minute or two the room was jocund with lurching lights and shadows. Phillips put the bellows down and took up *The White Feather*. He laid it on the log, and as a page caught, scorched, and broke into flame—he smiled and drew a long breath.

By-and-by he got up; and, still in his dripping coat, with one hand on the mantel-piece, he stood and watched the burning. Page after page curled as the fire ran licking across it; sometimes he could see a word or even a whole line. It took a long time to burn. Twice he had to stir it and turn it over and loosen the sheets with the poker so that they might catch again and roar into flame. When it was done, a black, crumpled, brittle mass lay on the ashes, moving and rustling a little in the draught of the chimney. Circles of red spread in it here and there, and then charred into blackness; once he

THE WHITE FEATHER

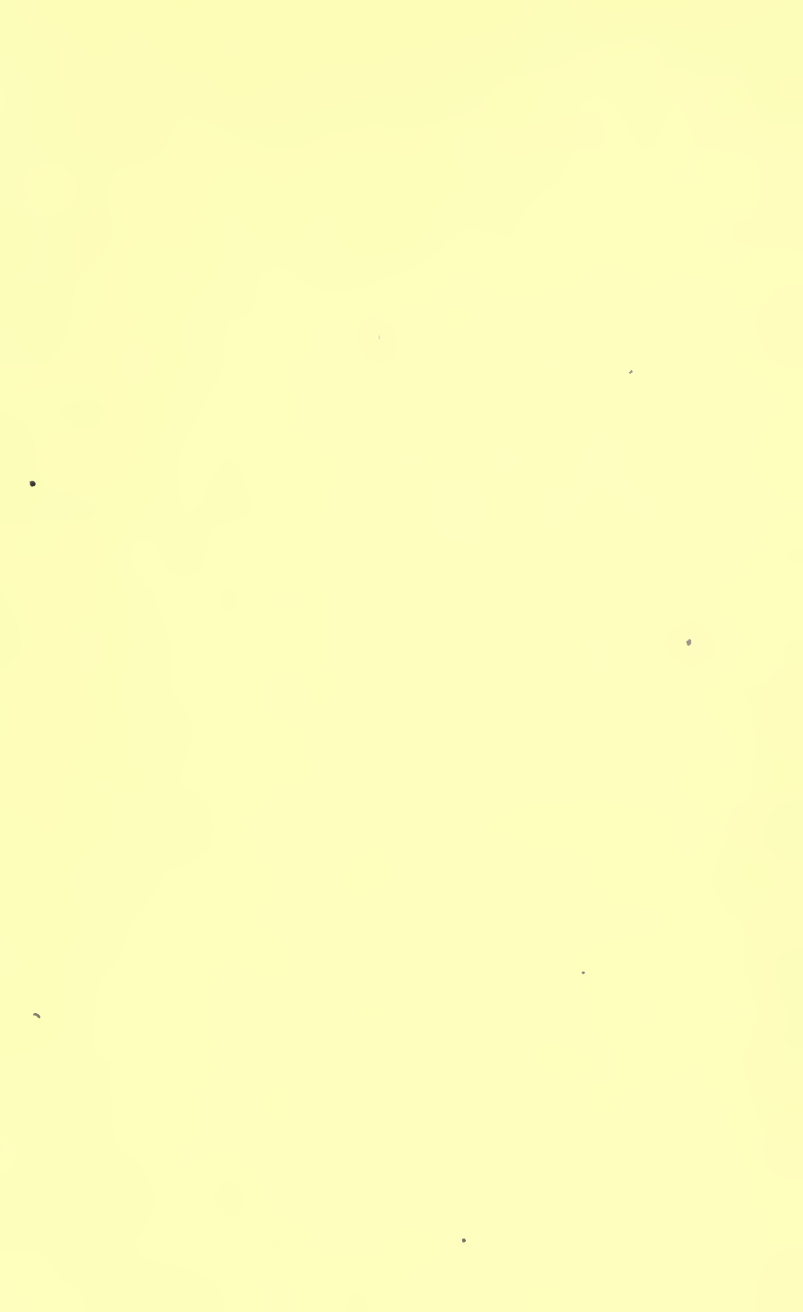
saw, suddenly, some typewritten letters shining in faint purple, then vanishing, as the thought for which they stood had vanished.

It was done. He brought the poker down on the curling heap, and it broke into flying, black flakes. He stirred them up, pushing them back under the log and hiding them as best he could.

"I will not!" he said to himself, triumphantly.

And this time there was no response.

THE END





UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 164 604 1

